Sermon for October 28, 2012
22 Pentecost
Jeremiah 31:7-9; Psalm 126; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52
by The Rev. Kim Forman

“Ecce, omnia nova facio.” -- “Behold, I make all things new.”

One of the great cartoonists of our time, Walt Kelly, taught us a lot about ourselves through a wise and lovable little possum named Pogo. In one of his adventures, Pogo misquoted U.S. Navy Captain Oliver Hazard Perry. After an engagement with the British in the War of 1812, Perry reported, “We have met the enemy and they are ours.” Pogo put it this way: “We have met the enemy and he is us!”

In today’s gospel we meet Bartimaeus, and we discover he is us. Jesus asks Bartimaeus: “What do you want me to do for you?” It’s a good question. Blind Bart had an answer. And we do too.

A story about healing a blind man is told in all three synoptic gospels, with some minor variations. Matthew has two of these healings and in both cases there are two blind men, not just one. Luke’s version has only one and doesn’t give his name. Only Mark identifies him as Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus.

Bible scholars see these differences as sure proof of their authenticity. If the apostles had huddled together to simply cook up a good story, they each would have told the exact same tale. They didn’t. That isn’t what happened. Each of the apostles lived their individual experiences, and they remembered them differently. We all do that. Witnesses to a car wreck or some criminal act will report very different minor details as they recall the basic incident they have experienced.

It would be interesting to hear the apostles talk today about the way they wrote their gospels. Can you hear Matthew saying: “Jesus healed a couple of blind guys twice; do you remember that?” Luke might answer: “I only remember one. We had come to Jericho on our last journey to Jerusalem.” And Mark would say: “That’s right. The blind guy was Bartimaeus. He followed us around for a while after that. Jesus told him, ‘Your faith has made you well.’”

Luke might say: “Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. Jesus asked him, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ Wasn’t that a kick? What a question!” Then the three of them might laugh and slap their knees and one would say: “That’s right. The guy was blind. It was pretty obvious what he wanted! Ha ha ha.”
The question Jesus asks is a central fact here the three would always remember. Matthew, Mark and Luke each include it in their gospels; Jesus asks: “What do you want me to do for you?” What do you want?

Bartimaeus was sitting by the road, alone, in his darkness, as a crowd gathered. Mark tells us: “When he heard it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’ Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’”

Now Bartimaeus didn’t have sunglasses, a white cane to tap, tap, tap along the road, or the harness of a service dog to hold onto, but Jesus must have known with a glance what this blind beggar wanted. Why then, does Jesus ask him: “What do you want me to do for you?” Maybe Jesus wants all of us who meet him on the road to express our need, to put it into words -- not for Jesus, for ourselves -- to clearly acknowledge who we are and our desperate dependence on grace.

We don’t know how Bartimaeus lost his eyesight. He was not born blind. In today’s reading he tells Jesus: “Let me see again.” In the New English Bible he says: “I want my sight back.” Bartimaeus knows what he has lost. He remembers. If he could see again, it would be a miracle of new life. Isn’t that what each of us wants too? That miracle of new life?

Like the gospel writers we might describe it with different details but we want to know new life through the promise of baptism. We know it when we hear it in scripture. We know it when we see it in liturgy and in the sacraments. We know it in the love of parents for their children and grandchildren. We know it in the sacrifice and service of people sitting with us here today.

We know new life has something to do with unconditional love and grace, a free gift we don’t deserve and cannot earn. That’s it, isn’t it? Jesus asks us: “What do you want me to do for you?” And we know what we are missing and our deep longing for it. Would we not ask: Help us to live into our baptism; give us new life; help us to love God and love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Then would we not step in behind blind beggar Bart and follow Jesus along his new road?

What else might we take away from this gospel? Let’s focus on the rather strange climax of this healing story. Blind Bart tells Jesus: “My teacher, let me see again.” And what does Jesus do? Think about this for a moment. If you look at this from a cynical point of view, you might say Jesus does nothing. He doesn’t make an ointment of dirt and spit and rub it on Bart’s eyes. He doesn’t anoint him with anything. He doesn’t lay his hands on Bart. He doesn’t pray for him. What does Jesus do?
He recognizes the faith of Blind Bartimaeus. Jesus says to him: “Go; your faith has made you well.” Notice: Jesus doesn’t say: “My faith has made you well.” Instead, he says: “Your faith has made you well.” Bartimaeus had that faith before Jesus called him, but without Jesus there, present, to work with him, Bart would not have been healed.

Not everyone who prays for healing – and has others praying for healing – gets the healing they ask for. Miraculous healing is not that simple. With all our faith and with all our scientific knowledge, healing is still a mystery.

Maybe we can help bring healing in some cases and in some we can’t. Maybe the best way to understand it is to think of healing as a form of grace, God’s love for us. We don’t deserve it and can’t earn it. Instead, if we can accept it with gratitude as a gift, and praise the giver, we might also hear Jesus say: “Ecce, omnia nova facio.” “Behold, I make all things new.”

Amen!