

“Begology”
St. Luke 18:31-43



Quinquagesima

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Did you see the press release in the Branding Iron, Friday? There is going to be a brand new program unveiled at the UW this fall, a PHD program in fact. You don't have to have a bachelors or masters degree to enroll, and it will take only one class. So what is this new program? It's a cutting edge new field applying the best of age old practices: Begology. Yeah, begging!

Anyone want to switch majors? How many of you would like to go into training to be a beggar? With the exception of the obligatory, "Dear Mom, please send money" letters or signs written so you can get on "the mtn" or CSTV (or in the good old days, ESPN) no reasonable person wants to be a beggar.

No, you are not going to college to become a beggar are you? A reasonable person would shun beggary with every fiber of his being. But let's be honest here. Why do you really not want to be a beggar? What is it about begging that seems so unseemly? Well, you would be completely at the mercy of others.

You see, to beg is to place yourself in the posture of complete receptivity; all a beggar can do is receive. No more Mr. Self-sufficiency. No more Mrs. "I-can-take-care-of-myself, thank you very much!" attitude. No more prideful independence. Only begging, only receiving, only the waiting hand held out to be filled by the merciful gift of another. Kind of like an infant, who must look outside of itself for everything. All an infant can do is cry; all an infant can do is receive. Kind of like what we see in the Gospel today – from an adult.

Begging, receiving, waiting--Bartimaeus knew all about that stuff. He lived it, day in and day out. There wasn't a child in Jericho who went to bed at night fantasizing about growing up to be just like him. He couldn't even see what a pitiful sight he was; his eyes had been blackened by blindness years before. All he could do was beg. All he could see was darkness. Enter the One who breaks the darkness!

Bartimaeus couldn't see but he had ears to hear. And one spring day what he heard would forever change his life. From beside the road he heard the noise of a multitude, so he asked what was going on. Someone responded, "*Jesus of Nazereth is passing by.*" That name "Jesus" entered his ears like food into a starving man's mouth. That was the man of whom he had heard (one of the few things he could do was to listen and he had plenty of time to listen to what was being said by passers by); Jesus, that was the man who had healed the lame, raised the dead, and restored--yes, restored!--the eyes of the blind; that was the man whom he believed must be the Christ. Hardly had the words, "*Jesus of Nazereth is passing by,*" filled his ears before his mouth was filled with the cry of a beggar, "*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*"

Some in the crowd scolded him, "Shut up! Be quiet, you beggar!" But the more they scolded, the more Bartimaeus begged, and the more harsh their rebuke the more bold his cry, "*Son of David, have mercy on me!*" And suddenly, the words found their mark. They hit the bulls-eye. Jesus stopped. A hush fell over the clamoring crowd. "*Call him here,*" Jesus commanded. No one had to ask, "Who?" because the beggar's voice was still pleading, "*Son of David, have mercy on me.*"

And so they brought him. He stood before Christ in the posture of complete receptivity; all he could do was receive. The beggar stood before Jesus by faith and not by sight. "*What do you want Me to do for you?*" Jesus asked. There was only one thing Bartimaeus wanted. He wanted to see again. He wanted to see his Benefactor. He wanted to see the Man in whom he believed. He wanted to lay His eyes on the face of that One in whom heaven is revealed.

And Jesus said, "*Receive your sight; your faith has saved you.*" And so it was that blind Bartimaeus became seeing Bartimaeus.

Now we all like this story don't we? We sit back and say, "My, oh my, what a good God we have, to show mercy even to someone as 'down-and-out' as Bartimaeus. No reasonable person wants to be a beggar--a blind one at that!--so I'm sure Bartimaeus was eternally grateful that our Lord rescued him from that miserable life. I am sure glad that I am not in his shoes....." But, ah-ha, that is the whole point. You can't imagine being someone as lowly as a beggar can you? What does a beggar have to brag about? What great accomplishments shall a beggar boast of? What money, what land, what car, what house shall a beggar proudly claim as his own, that which he has worked hard to earn? None, absolutely none.

For everything he has, he has received from another. Self-sufficiency is, for him, suicide, for how can one who has nothing survive without help from outside himself? So all the beggar is, all he has, and all he does, he must attribute to someone else; everything is for him gift--pure, entire gift. And, that my friends, is actually the posture of faith. Bartimaeus is a living, beggarly role model of your faith. You must be like him. You are like him in Christ.

On the day that Luther died, those who watched him die at his bedside, found a small scrap of paper on which he had scribbled the words. "We are all beggars, this is true!" And it is! But we hate that it's true! We so desperately crave to claim something as our very own, something no one else had any part in giving us. We long for independence, to boast that we are dependent upon nothing and no one. All we need is ourselves. But that's idolatry-talk; that's "I'm-a-god-unto-myself" speech. Only God is in need of no one but Himself. Only God is independent. Only God is pure Giver.

My friends, what Luther said could not have been more true, and it is a message to behold not only when we die, but even now. You can run to the local Christian bookstore and watch the cheesy televangelists and slick preachers on the cable religious channels tell you that God wants you to be successful, but it is all a lie. What matters here is not that God granted Bartimaeus sight so he could begin to become successful. What matters is that God granted him such faith to simply receive because the Christian life is a beggarly one. It was an extra gift that he could see with his eyes in this life.

You see, begology isn't really a bad thing – it is being a Christian. So let me give you a little crash course in Begology 101:

Before your Father in heaven you stand in a posture of complete reception--whether you like it or not, believe it or not, fight against it or not. God gives, you receive, and it's never the other way around, never. God needs absolutely nothing from you and you need absolutely everything from Him. You can't even breathe without God giving you the gift of breath. You can't eat and drink without God giving you the gift of food and water, not to mention lips, and a tongue and a throat, and a stomach. Before the Divine Benefactor you are always and only begging, receiving, holding out the waiting hand to be filled by the merciful gift of Another. That is why it is hard for the rich to enter the Kingdom of heaven, not because of their riches, but because the more you have, the harder it is to realize that you must be a beggar before God, that your salvation must come from outside of yourself.

And that is why the message of Christ's Church is so radically counter-cultural. And the world hates us for it, because no reasonable person wants to be a beggar, not before God and certainly not before neighbor. So, here is your homework: Quit being reasonable – don't let reason dictate to you what kind of person you ought to be. God is always calling you to be the opposite of what you are naturally inclined to be. God wants you to be a beggar before Him. God desires that you hold an empty hand in front of His face, day after day, year after year, and plead with Him to fill it. God wants you to beg and beg and beg until you receive the good things He's promised to give you.

Like all of Jesus' miracles, this healing was a costly one. It cost Him his life on the cross. There Jesus won the victory for us all by bearing our physical ailments and infirmities, our sin and pain and sorrow, suffering them all to death in His body. And He shares that victory with all who cry out to Him in beggarly faith. The One who healed the eyes of the blind man, hung on a cross in the darkness to bring the light of His resurrection to the world, that the blind may see.

Know, then, that the Lord hears your prayers, even when they seem to go unanswered. Ultimately they have all been answered in Jesus' dying and rising. For now we walk by faith in that truth; but on the Last Day our faith will turn to sight, just as it was here with Bartimaeus. Every bodily disorder and disability will be done away with—from failing vision to poor hearing, from arthritis to paralysis, from clogged arteries to heart disease to cancer; sin and death itself will be eradicated completely, and the Great Physician will raise you in both body and soul to share in His own glory and life.

When the blind man received his sight, he followed Jesus. He walked with Him on the road to Jerusalem and the cross. As we prepare to enter Lent, let us also follow Jesus and walk with Him to the cross, to the place where His body and blood are given and shed for us, that when the final Easter comes, we may hear Him say to us, "*Your faith has saved you; receive your sight,*" and we then behold with our eyes the face of God.

We are all beggars this is true.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.