

<i>SERMON AT</i>	<i>Virginia Theological Seminary</i>
<i>By:</i>	<i>The Revd Leon Spencer</i>
<i>Church season:</i>	<i>Service for the Mission of the Church</i>
<i>Date:</i>	<i>May 18, 2005</i>
<i>Gospel:</i>	<i>Mark 10:46-52</i>
<i>Key scripture:</i>	<i>Bartimaeus</i>

Dinis Sengulane, the Bishop of Lebombo in Mozambique, tells the story that after Ascension there was a press conference in Heaven. One journalist asked Jesus to admit that his mission had been a failure. Jesus replied that he had people to continue his mission. The journalist persisted: “Whom do you have in mind?” he wanted to know, citing a few of Jesus’ followers who hadn’t worked out all that well. Jesus replied: “I entrusted to the Church to continue the mission of proclaiming Good News to the world. They will do it.” “Don’t you have any other plan?” asked the journalist. “I have no other plan,” Jesus said. “The Church is my plan.”

Now, from time to time I find that a discouraging thought, until I think of a phrase a Sudanese priest, Ezra Baya Lawiri, used to use. In the midst of crisis, difficulties, failures, he’d simply comment, “But God is not defeated.”

But God is not defeated. I believe that to be true, ultimately. I believe it is more *likely* to be true today if we as the people of God – the *Church* – allow ourselves to be *interrupted*. That’s why I chose the Bartimaeus story for this evening. Jesus allowed himself to be *interrupted*. There he was that day heading out of Jericho, with his disciples and a large crowd. He presumably had an agenda. He certainly had a destination, and he had an opportunity along the road for teaching... he had his *mission* of proclaiming the Kingdom of God. With that on his mind, a blind beggar’s calling out to him, over and over, was an inconvenience, a distraction. That’s obviously what his disciples thought. And yet Jesus – saying “call him here” – allowed the interruption. Or did he?

What if it wasn’t an interruption? What if his teaching agenda along the road was not – as ours today is likely to be – how apostles, ordained and lay leaders, could be effective communicators and able administrators and wise pastors and possess the other qualities we ascribe to those who lead “successful” churches? What if the Bartimaeuses of our world *were* the Church’s mission, and matters of church administration and church growth were the interruptions, our organized agenda of maintaining the Church? What if the most *important* thing that happened on that day on the road from Jericho was that Jesus stopped and turned in the direction of Bartimaeus’ voice and told his disciples, “*call him here*”?



David Bosch, the South African missiologist, offered one of the most succinct yet profound definitions of mission I’ve ever heard: “Mission,” he wrote, “is the good news of God’s love, incarnate in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world... the good news of God’s love, incarnate in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world.”

Neat, but hardly tidy, not if we were to take the word *witness* and the phrase “for the sake of the world” seriously. Sometimes we do. And there is much that remains promising and hopeful in our life together as a Church. The beauty of liturgy, the joy of good fellowship, the power to touch one another that only begins to be revealed in the words *pastoral care*, the sense of familyhood – *ujamaa* was the word Mwalimu Julius Nyerere used, proclaiming our being part of family in a manner that was not without theological meaning – a sense of family that by *limiting* us enhances our individual journeys... *all of this* reveals the good news of God’s love expressed in the warmth of a church community. I acknowledge that. And, I recognize that out of it comes a witness *for the sake of the world*. When a Bartimaeus comes to our parish door wanting us to “have mercy” on him we usually interrupt our valuable work, our particular ministry, to do something about it. But it’s not enough. It’s still an interruption.

We face grave crises in the Church, in our communities, in our nation and in our world. Within the Church we are caught up in a divisive debate about what is truth and who is faithful (far beyond our immediate preoccupation with sex), and in the midst of that debate, to engage in thoughtful conversation about “Christ and culture” – that critical contextualization of our faith – is often an impossibility. We then project those conflicts beyond ourselves into our communities, conveniently defining who is right and who is to become or to remain marginalized. Within our nation – as often within our churches – we are consumed with individualism and materialism to such an extreme extent that we have little regard for the common good, certainly not for those who live in poverty (a word rarely heard in last year’s political campaigns or indeed in many of our parishes *but heard often enough in the Bible*). Within our world we confuse our power as a nation with our vision of our own faithfulness, and in the process we show little regard for justice or little respect for human dignity. Locally, nationally, and world-wide, the Church has failed miserably to address one of the great themes of both the New and Old Testaments, that of *economic justice*. We may pay for Bartimaeus to see an ophthalmologist, but we won’t ask too many questions about why he had to come to us in the first place.

To witness for the sake of the world.

It’s not that we don’t try to say the “right things.” We’ve got some fine resolutions – the excellent General Convention resolution on 0.7% and the Millennium Development Goals comes to mind – and we’ve got some good statements – our Presiding Bishop’s recent critique of our national budget and the priorities it reflects is a case in point. Some of us read them and say “good for us;” others are uneasy, much preferring to restrict mission to personal evangelism. Whatever our response to forays into public policy that deal with human need and that challenge systemic injustice in our society and world, they’re *still* an interruption. Even the word we most frequently use for responding “to human need by loving service” and for seeking “to transform the unjust structures of society,” as the Anglican Consultative Council describes two of their “Five Marks of Mission” – that word for those actions, *outreach*, implies as much... reaching *out* from our central mission, that of performing churchly activities, toward a diversion into good works. A “good” interruption, but an interruption nevertheless.

We've got several *hundred* references to the poor and poverty in the Bible, *and* with a consistent message. (We *may* have seven biblical passages concerned with homosexuality, if that contrast tells you anything.) Why hasn't economic justice – again, one of the *greatest* themes within God's revelation and call to us – aroused the passion of the people of God? Why are there not those among us declaring themselves to be “out of communion” with others among us who support tax cuts for the rich while opposing a minimum *living* wage for workers existing in poverty? (I'm not recommending that, by the way. I believe passionately in Jesus' prayer that we all may be one, and however deep my convictions on questions of justice may be, I try as best I can to live that out.) *But...* proclaiming the Kingdom of God as a vision of God's sovereign rule over the world, where Jesus' very presence promised an historical possibility where we could both live into and anticipate the fullness of a *kingdom* vision of social harmony and justice – *that's* a proclamation *for the sake of the world*. Blind beggars by the side of the road are, in their *poverty*, crying out for justice, and you and I – the Church – are there to see and *act* as if there were *no* other reason, *no* other calling, that could be greater than this.

Over 8,000 African children, women and men die every *day* of AIDS-related causes. That's 111 children of God who will have died from the time I began this sermon until I complete it in the next few minutes. And yet our government has battled from the beginning of this administration to limit the availability of affordable medicines to Africa and the rest of the Global South, preferring instead to protect patents and pharmaceutical profits.... Well, there's a lot to protect. While much of Africa exists on less than a dollar a day, the CEO of the pharmaceutical giant Pfizer received over \$57,000 *every single day* last year. Let's *talk* about economic justice. *There's* a “moral value” for us.

Let's talk about the fact that over 800 million people in the world go hungry every day. Let's talk about a nation – ours – where child poverty is double the rate of other wealthy industrialized countries, where one out of every eight people – 36 *million* people – live in poverty. Let's talk about a world in which 20% of the world's people consume well over 80% of the world's goods, and a world in which the income gap between rich and poor continues to expand. Let's talk about 45 million people in the United States without health insurance, or well over one *billion* people in the world with no access to clean water... where the answer of those with power is privatization: Water a commodity for profit, water for those who can pay. Or what of seeds, a *foundation* for God's creation and for sustaining life? Seeds used by traditional African farmers for generations on end are being patented by corporations – the privatization of life itself. *I know* that the Lord maintains the cause of the needy, the psalmist writes, and executes justice for the poor.... I don't doubt our God's commitment to the cause of the needy; it's ours I question.

To *do* justice, *economic* justice, as an expression of the Church's mission to *witness for the sake of the world* is not easy, and the complexity of a field like economics – that even economists barely seem to understand – can be intimidating. And, the forces arrayed against the Church are formidable indeed. But I am more and more convinced that matters of *economic* justice are the most urgent “witness for the sake of the world” that there is. Where is the common good (and Catholic social teaching should not stand alone in its deep theological understanding of the concept of the common good)... where is the common good served by the economic policies of those with power today?



To witness for the sake of the world. How we do this I do not know. During my years at the Washington Office on Africa, in my small way I tried. I was not alone in raising this vision of economic justice in contrast to US policy toward Africa. Many of us did. We didn't have hundreds of thousands of dollars to donate to key political campaigns. All we had were voices – *faithful* voices – that declared that this (whatever *this* might be at the moment) was wrong. That's where my affection for Canon Lawiri's phrase, "But God is not defeated," began. Because *we* sure were. So I don't know what we do. I do know two things, though, and here's where I'll end.

First, I know what Jesus did when he told his disciples, "Call him here," and Bartimaeus came. What Jesus did next was to ask Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" Now think about this for a moment. Jesus had a reputation for healing, and here was a blind man. A busy man, with an agenda, might quickly heal Bartimaeus, and get back to business. But Jesus took the time not merely to have a little conversation, as if making a pastoral gesture; instead he allowed Bartimaeus to define his own needs, his own hopes.... *Who is at the table* remains a critical issue for the Church and the world. People who live in poverty need to be part of decisions about their lives. People living with AIDS need to be where power lies, where decisions are made as the world seeks, haltingly, to confront this pandemic. We need to ask our African brothers and sisters – among many others – "What do you want me to do *with* you?" A witness for the sake of the world is as relational as it is prophetic. Ensuring an inclusive table is *no* inconvenient interruption.

Second, I know what Myles Horton, the founder of the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, did, when he struggled over his own calling. In his autobiography, *The Long Haul*, he tells of how he had a sense from the earliest of times what he wanted to do, but he searched for some years about how to do it. At Cumberland University, at Union Theological Seminary, the University of Chicago, Hull House, even the "folk schools" in Denmark, he was constantly describing his vision of a progressive social movement in Appalachia, and looking for guidance about the "how." Then, on Christmas night in Copenhagen in 1931, he wrote to himself that what he

must do is go back..., move in [he said] and you are there. The situation is there. You start with this and let it grow. You know your goal [your mission]. It will build its own structure and take its own form. You can go to school all your life [he wrote], you'll never figure it out because you are trying to get an answer that can only come from the people in [their] life situation.

After that Christmas night reflection Myles Horton wrote what I have witnessed so often with our African brothers and sisters; he wrote that "it all seemed so clear and simple – the way to get started was to start."

We in the Western churches are excellent at studying things. We can be quite good organizers and planners, and others might learn something from us in this regard. But sometimes

we consider that our short-term studies are sufficient for long-term tasks – “we did poverty last year,” we in a parish might say; “we’re doing the environment now.” And sometimes when we do decide to *act*, we consume literally years on goals, objectives, strategies. For our *economic justice* witness for the sake of the world, we need faithful action, and matters are of such urgency that *we don’t have the time* to wait until we “know it all” and have a sophisticated plan. Decisions are being made *now* that will perpetuate economic *injustice* for decades to come. Myles Horton was right, and our African partners often show us the way: “The way to get started is to start.”



We as the Church need to move away from a predilection toward treating our mission of witness for the sake of the world as an interruption. We need to start, and start again... to affirm the capacity of the people of God to consider these things and to find ways to live into them faithfully – that’s *central* to our responsibilities within the Church. Mission for the sake of the world challenges us to be in solidarity with one another, globally, with those who live in fear, oppression, and need. Mission calls us to community. Mission calls us to servanthood. And when we *do* start – *if* we do – we will be able to join with our African sisters and brothers and with all those who seek the common good, to join with them in proclaiming with hope and confidence, “God *is* not defeated.” *That’s* mission, my friends. And the way to get started is to start. Amen.