

Getting to Go – Mark 10: 46-52  
Sermon prepared and preached by Rev. Don Hammond  
For First Central Congregational UCC Omaha, Nebraska  
October 25, 2009

This Friday past there was an event in Philadelphia, (even though I am a Philly's fan, this is not meant to be a tag for them, nor is it about them at all). Helena Page is a 17 year-old student and cross-country runner at Randolph Career Academy. During the race another runner from another school, Dominique Lincoln, fell and went unconscious. A number of runners ran by, focused upon the competition and the finish line. Helena had some training in CPR and stopped to attend to the unconscious runner - elevating her legs, checking see if CPR was necessary and keeping her covered and warm until more helped arrived. Helena was disqualified from the race.

Later, her efforts and selflessness were identified and, though she remained disqualified from the race, her actions proved to be far more significant and exemplary than competing in any running race.

A number of comments were made about her actions. For the most part, she received accolades and admiration for her ability to quickly prioritize the more important need to respond to human suffering than to push on in competition for the finish line of the cross-country race.

There was one comment by a reader that I found unsettling. It read:

*“This girl should not be a hero. She had a responsibility to her team members and she is wasting time on some girl who should know better than to be laying on the ground in the middle of a sporting event. What would have happened if all the racers that day decided to lay down on the side of the road. That certainly would have been a very tiring event for the spectators to watch. I think it is the responsibility of all the coaches to insure that thier racers are actually racing and not laying on the side of the road”*

I can't help but wonder how many others hold similar ideals? Could these be the words of someone who simply does not get it, or is it an attitude of a culture that has encouraged and, at very least, allowed such hardness, cruelty and insensitivity to go unchallenged when it surfaces? Is it our culture that affirms the value of “climbing to the

top” even at the expense of others perishing? As a side note. I was encouraged by the words of support by many others to Helena for her ability to let go of what is unimportant and respond to the cry of human need.

Jesus, the Gospel tells us, was leaving Jericho. I am not certain what to make of it, but I have noticed that a large number of the Gospel stories about Jesus happen while he is either coming into or leaving a community. Perhaps it is because he is always on the go. Jesus does not stay put even though he is frequently asked to say and become one of the people of that community.

Today’s story tells us that as he is leaving Jericho, a blind beggar man, Bartimaeus, is seated by the road. It is unusual for such a person to have their name recorded in the Scriptures. Even more unusual is the recording of his father’s name, Timaeus. The man had family and yet he was reduced to begging. Up the road comes Jesus, and Bartimaeus was in wait. As Jesus approaches, Bartimaeus shouts “*Son of David, have pity on me.*” “So, how much money are you in need of?” Jesus might have asked. After all, Bartimaeus was begging, and money is what beggars are in need of. Jesus does ask Bartimaeus what he wants, and the man could have said “some food, wine, a few denair,” but instead says “I want my sight back,” and, of course, Jesus has pity on him and restores his sight. Here is where it becomes more interesting. Jesus tells him to “Go,” not “come,” but “go.” Go where? Go home to your family, go get a job, go to a new place to live, go anywhere, but “Go.”

We don’t know much more about Bartimaeus, but what we do know is that he did not “go,” instead he chose to follow Jesus, and Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, a dangerous place for him and anyone of those who followed him there. Jesus invited many people to follow him who did not follow. Remember the rich man who Jesus really wanted to follow him but he went home because following meant he would need to rid himself of his excessive wealth? There were others as well. Bartimaeus, a poor blind beggar who now had the opportunity to get back into the race, return to his family with a new normal, to get on with life and all the routines and traditions that he once enjoyed, instead of returning, goes with Jesus to Jerusalem.

Helena, the cross-country runner, was honoring all the traditions that we all have learned to honor as well. The traditions of competing and winning – run faster than the

others and if someone shows a weakness or a vulnerability, take advantage of it. That may work well when running a foot race, but it is terrible when running in the human race. The living example of Jesus was to stop along the road when he heard the cry “have pity on me.” Jesus was going somewhere very important, so important that it would change the focus and direction of the world, but he heard the cry of “have pity on me,” and he stopped and responded to the cry of human need.

I love the traditions of the Church, and I suspect that is also true for most of you, but traditions are meaningless if we are unable to see, hear, and respond to the needs of God’s people of today. Traditions are important, but the needs that God’s people face today are more important. Going to Jerusalem was important to Jesus, but the cry for need became more important to him and he stopped, stepped out of the race, and attended to a fallen and broken former runner.

Tom Long is a well known preacher, writer, and homiletics (preaching) professor. In one of his books *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*) he writes:

*“...before we can open our mouths to speak some good news from God, we usually have to burn a little shoe leather to journey to the people who need to hear these words of comfort. Whether it is traveling to a hospital ward, entering the family room at the funeral home, going across the street to a neighbors’ house, or picking up the phone and sending our caring thoughts across the wires to a person in need, speaking faithful words to other people often means going to be with them, journeying down the road to the place of meeting, being people of ‘the Way.’”*

I suppose that is what it means to be “one of His.” I suppose it is more about doing what others run past, like hearing the cry of someone yelling “*Have pity upon me.*” I suppose it is breaking the rules of tradition that keeps us separated from others and tells us that Jesus is about “me, him, and God.” It is easy to become that kind of Christian because there is nothing to push us outside ourselves.

Some of you might be familiar with the name Clarence Jordan. You might know him best for Cotton Patch stories. Jordan is also the founder of Koinonia Farm, an interracial commune outside Americus, Georgia.

Jordan grew up in a prosperous family, received a traditional theological education and a Ph.D in Greek New Testament from Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky and was well on his way to becoming a professor.

Instead, he left seminary to establish the interracial community in segregated Georgia in the mid-1950s. He ran into all kinds of trouble for it, especially from his own denomination. He was excommunicated with the charge “*have persisted in holding services where both white and colored attend together.*”

It did not end there. He and the community experienced vandalism, cross-burning, legal pressures, beatings, bombing, an economic boycott, and shooting by snipers who aimed at any available target on the commune.

Jordan’s brother was an attorney. Clarence turned to him and asked if he would be the legal representative of the Koinonia Community. His brother Robert later served as a Georgia state senator and a justice of the Georgia State Supreme Court. Robert declined the invitation.

“Clarence, I can’t do that,” Robert said. “You know my political aspirations. Why, if I represent you, I might lose my job, my house, everything I’ve got.” To which Clarence responded, “we might lose everything too.” “It is different for you,” Robert replied.

Clarence then said to his brother, “I remember, it seems to me, that you and I joined the church the same Sunday as boys. I expect when we came forward the preacher asked me about the same question he did you. He asked me, ‘Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?’ and I said, ‘Yes.’ What did you say?”

“I follow Jesus, Clarence, up to a point.”

“Could that point by any chance be the cross?” Clarence asked.

“That’s right. I follow him to the cross, but not on the cross. I’m not getting myself crucified.”

Clarence then said, “Then I don’t believe you’re a disciple. You are an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple of his. I think you ought to go back to the church you belong to, and tell them you’re an admirer not a disciple.”

“Well now,” said brother Robert, “If everyone who felt like I do did that, we wouldn’t have a church, would we?”

“The question, “ Clarence said, “is do you have a church?” (David Augsburger, Dissident Discipleship: A Spirituality of Sel-Surrender, Love of God, and Love of Neighbor. Via Pulpit Resource Vol. 37 no. 4 pp 19-20)

Therein lies one of the greatest threats to the Church. When God says “Go,” which way do we turn? Do we “go” inward or outward? Do we run on to the finish line seeking first place in the run? Or do we “go” to the voice of the one sitting by the side of the road saying “have pity on me?” If it is the latter, then that is what we are here for...that is what we are HERE for...that is what WE are here for.

Amen.