

**Sermon for 10-28-18**  
**Gospel - Mark 10:46-52**  
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**Christ Episcopal Church, Springfield OH**

I wonder if any of you have ever developed a deep appreciation for someone's creative work right after they've died? A novelist, maybe, or a painter or a musician? You realize that you're drawn to this person's writing or art, and it seems ironic that you were unaware of their work while they were still alive... this is the way I feel about John Denver, because I love his music, but didn't know any of it before I started college -- 2 years after his death.

Most of you have heard of John Denver, no doubt, but you probably haven't heard of John Hull. I hadn't, either, until a few short weeks ago. John Hull, who died in 2015, was a distinguished professor of Religious Education at Birmingham University in England, a prolific writer, researcher, and theologian.<sup>i</sup> His vast body of work is inspiring and profoundly affecting.

John Hull has challenged me to read and hear and understand Holy Scripture differently. He described the Bible as a uniquely precious diamond, gifted by God to all people for the purpose of discerning truth, and he emphasized the importance of reading and interpreting Scripture anew in every time and place. He said that each person's perspective, each new viewpoint is like another facet of that diamond, another angle through which the light of truth shines through and illuminates God's Word with more patterns and colors than any one of us could ever imagine.<sup>ii</sup>

What if we apply this concept to the story of Bartimaeus in today's Gospel? What if the encounter between Bartimaeus and Jesus on the

outskirts of Jericho is our diamond to consider, and to illuminate from different angles?

I'll be honest; my first instinct, my superficial reading, is that this is just another healing miracle. Another feel-good story, in which our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ encountered a person in need, an outcast, and had pity on him. When others wanted to walk on by and ignore Bartimaeus, Jesus called to him and healed him and restored his sight. Amazing grace - Bartimaeus was blind, and now he sees! Thanks be to God!

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I may hear this Gospel passage and draw conclusions about the miraculous power and compassion of Christ, but those are not the only conclusions to be drawn, the only truths to be found here. After all, this story does not belong to me, or to any one of us. The diamond that is the story of Bartimaeus and Jesus belongs to all God's children -- rich and poor, young and old, black and white... sighted and blind...

John Hull, the theologian who gave us this diamond analogy, developed cataracts in both eyes by age 13, and in the following decades experienced multiple retinal detachments and other complications. He became totally blind in 1980, when he was 45 years old. From that point on until his death in 2015, he continued his teaching, writing and research on the subject of religious education, but also wrote extensively about the experience of blindness, and the effects of blindness on his faith.

One of Hull's most powerful later writings is an essay called *Open Letter from a Blind Disciple to a Sighted Saviour*. In it, he addresses Jesus directly, questioning the use of blindness as a metaphor for ignorance and stubbornness in the Gospels. He speaks about the experience of living as a blind person in a world designed and organized by sighted

people, and about the pain of finding that same alienation amplified in parts of Scripture.

"When I studied the New Testament as a sighted person, it did not occur to me that you, Jesus, were yourself sighted. We were in the same world, but it did not occur to me that being sighted was a world. I thought that things were just like that. When I became blind, then I realised that blindness is a world, and that the sighted condition also generates a distinctive experience and can be called a world. Now I find, Jesus, that I am in one world and you are in another."<sup>iii</sup>

He goes on, illustrating the paradox of these miraculous healing stories for people living with blindness today: "In your presence, [Lord], blind people [like Bartimaeus] felt the hope and discovered the reality of the restoration of sight but you did not offer to blind people courage and acceptance in their blindness. You would have led me by the hand out of blindness but you would not have been my companion during my blindness. This is a cause of confusion and pain to me and many blind people, and those who have other disabilities."

Toward the end of his letter, Hull finds a point of connection with Jesus in the events of Good Friday, one that allows him to affirm his faith as a blind disciple. It's just before Jesus is dragged off from the Sanhedrin, the council of priests, and the guards are abusing him -- striking him, spitting on him, mocking him, and blindfolding him.<sup>iv</sup>

Hull says this: "To be blindfolded is not to be blind. To be a sighted person who cannot see is not the same as to be a blind person. Nevertheless, it begins to come close... You have become a partner in my world, one who shares my condition, my blind brother."

The final paragraph of Hull's *Open Letter*: "When I began to write to you, my mind was full of questions. Then my confusion turned into indignation and then I wrote with tears when I realised that you not only died for me but you became blind for me. And what can I say to you now about the passages which offended and hurt me so much? Well, Lord, if I may say so without presumption, I forgive you. But is it not your role to forgive me? Yes, but perhaps our relationship is becoming more mutual. Blind people, after all, do lead other blind people. You have been this way before, so you are familiar with it. Take my hand, blind master, and lead me.

Yours sincerely,  
John"

My friends, we have heard a miracle story today. But here is the real miracle, the greatest gift of our God-made-flesh -- whatever our infirmities, impairments, disabilities, whatever is named as broken or faulty or lacking in us, whatever renders us 'imperfect' in body or in mind -- Christ is found there. Our Living Lord, who was debased, demeaned, degraded and destroyed, knows the fullness of our human condition and every possible limitation or frailty. He is not afraid or disgusted; he does not turn away. He loves us in every condition, in every state; we need not feign perfection for him. He calls us, and welcomes us, and loves us **just as we are** -- in our full humanity.

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One of the foundational principles of dis/ability theology -- and it's a principle that our nation and our world need so desperately right now - - is the mandate that we must broaden and expand our definition of what it means to be human. As people of faith, we know that all human beings are made by God in God's image; and yet, it can be so easy to fall into patterns of thought and speech that betray this truth. If we

allow ourselves (and those around us) to forget that all human beings, all of us, have equal humanity -- equal worth, equal dignity, equal basic human rights -- well, then we end up with the kind of mess we find ourselves in today....

With events that deny and degrade the humanity of others:

- pipe bombs sent through the mail to prominent members of 'the other party;'
- innocent grocery shoppers targeted and killed because of the color of their skin;<sup>v</sup>
- and defenseless worshippers slaughtered in God's own house, simply because they are Jewish.

These events are undeniably, unspeakably tragic; and Jesus weeps alongside those who suffer.

In the face of all this, what is our duty, our call as children of God?

My friends, we must resist the forces of dehumanization, the forces that want us to forget our shared humanity, with all that we have. When we hear language of dehumanization: *those people; those animals; it's all their fault; they're unworthy; they're disgusting; they're a threat; they're not like us....* When we hear this language from others, or when we sense it rising up inside ourselves, we must recall our humanity. We must remember, and we must proclaim, the truth that all human beings -- of any religion, any race, any physical or mental ability, any age, any educational or economic status, any nationality, any sexual orientation or gender identity... **all people** -- are equally worthy of life, of dignity, of respect, and are equally loved by the One who created us all.

In the story of Bartimaeus, after Jesus restores his sight, notice how Jesus does not take credit for what has occurred. Rather, he says to Bartimaeus: "Go; your faith has made you well."<sup>vi</sup>

***Your faith has made you well.***

For Bartimaeus, it was his faith in the all-encompassing love and mercy of Jesus Christ that gave him courage to throw off the cloak of shame, and made him well. For us, it may be that our faith in God's love and ever-widening circle of compassion is the only thing that can make us well.

My friends, may our unshakeable faith in the full and equal God-given dignity of every person make us, and our nation, well. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/aug/16/john-hull>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.johnmhull.biz/letter%20from%20a%20blind%20disciple.htm>  
(*Open Letter* - Introduction)

<sup>iii</sup> Open Letter to Jesus (same link as above)

<sup>iv</sup> Luke 22:63-65

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/26/us/kentucky-kroger-shooting/index.html>

<sup>vi</sup> Mark 10:52