

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett
October 25, 2009
What do we see?
Jeremiah 31:7-14, Mark 10:46-52

We have a story today that can inspire us. But we have to see inspiration through the story of a poor blind beggar in ancient Jericho. None of us here is poor or blind like he was and we cannot travel back in time. So how might this story play out in our time and place?

Bart was a man who was sitting on the sidelines of life. His work was not meaningful or fulfilling. He had family and friends, but did not feel connected. He didn't care about anything and felt empty and alone. His life was dull and gray, full of shadows and darkness. Bart went through the motions of each day without any real hope for the future. It looked like he would live his days, die and be buried without accomplishing much. It really didn't matter anyway-because his life had no purpose. He lived a ho-hum existence.

While he was out for lunch one day Bart saw a big crowd. He asked what was happening and was told that people were lining up for a book signing. "Another self-help guru," he thought impatiently, "people are always looking for magic happiness or chasing after entertainment." But instead of just going on his way, he surprised himself. He yelled out "Hey, do you really know what you are talking about?!"

The people around him tried to shush him- they were trying to hear the teacher and to get their books autographed. He didn't listen. He yelled again, "Hey, do you really believe anything you are preaching?" Bart didn't care what anyone thought of him,

besides the guy probably got heckled all the time. Bart figured he would ignore Bart like everyone else did.

But Bart was surprised. The teacher motioned him to come forward. The crowd parted magically, like Moses with the Red Sea. Bart went over and the teacher shook his hand. The man's handshake was gentle in its strength, comforting in its grasp. He asked Bart about himself, about his work and his life. The crowd seemed to disappear. It was like the two of them were completely alone. The man smiled at him, and Bart felt more loved than he had ever felt. He could tell by the look in his eyes that the man really did care about him. He listened to Bart with such compassion that Bart felt heard and known, better than ever before in his life. All too soon the man said, "You'd better get on to work my friend."

Soon, the crowd disbursed. All those people who lined up for autographs moved on to another celebrity event. The books ended up at friends of the library used book sales, mostly unread.

Bart went on with his day, but everything changed. The first thing he did at the office was to call his wife and tell her he loved her. He worked harder at his job that day than ever, but it seemed interesting and easy, and the people were all so nice. He took off early and went to his daughter's ball game. He helped his son with his homework, and for the first time, they not only didn't fight to get it done, they had fun. On Saturday he called a friend and helped him paint his house. On Sunday he surprised the family by taking them to worship. The next week he even changed his work hours so he could get involved with the church serving meals to the homeless.

Bart was noticed, someone listened to him, and for the first time in his life, he could truly see the love of God. In that moment, everything looked different- brighter, more colorful, more beautiful, in sharper focus. Bart was transformed and he went about transforming his life, the lives of the people around him, and his community, because of what he could see.

Bartimaeus, the blind beggar also saw something the others did not. He not only saw it, he reached out for it. He threw off his cloak- anything that might bind him and ran toward it. He asked for what he saw could be possible, he was transformed and it changed his life forever.

Jeremiah was a Hebrew prophet who told the people about transformation that was possible. God's vision for the future: people from all over the earth, living in peace. There will be enough to eat and drink for everyone. Everyone will be included and equal in a community of harmony and justice. We will know God, sing and be happy together. We will dance and be merry, we will be joyful and never sorrow again. It sounds like a vision of what we have told will be heaven above. Yet Jeremiah and Jesus saw it as the vision of God's people on earth.

What do we see? What vision do we have? What we see or imagine or believe can open the future for us. I read some articles lately by progressive Christians. They note that the name Christian has been used in very unfortunate ways and that many of us spend a great deal of our time denying what some other Christians say and believe. Instead, they say we must spend time determining and talking about what we see and believe. If we want people to know we see God and faith differently, it is time that we

give words to our faith. We need to talk about our faith and have the courage to share it with the world.

But I think this is just the first step. We can talk all about what we see. But we have to do more than just talk about it. If we see God's vision for the world is people from all over the earth, living in peace, with enough to eat and drink, if we believe that God wants a world where everyone is included and equal in a community of harmony and justice, if we know God's vision for God's people on earth, then we have to do something.

This is not Pollyanna. I have seen a tank painted in the middle of the night by Israeli and Palestinian children who want peace. I have seen Muslims in Whittier respond to remove swastikas painted on the synagogue. I have seen a UCC church between pastors, with no building, raise money to send a whole group team of people to another country to dig wells to supply clean water for a village. And we can start right here: with our lives and our own church.

If we want people to know what we see about the truth about God, if we want Hillcrest to grow and continue as a community of faith we start right here. We begin by sharing what we see and dream to be possible for our community. Then we focus on becoming that vision, we direct everything we do; worship, education, outreach, mission, and even the search for a new pastor to focus on that goal. Why are you here? What do you appreciate and what makes Hillcrest special? What is God calling Hillcrest to do?

I looked for inspirational stories about churches to so you could see the possibilities for Hillcrest renewal. But I didn't find them in books or from my colleagues. Instead I found it in the people here and the stories I have heard here about

this church. Do you know what incredible people you are? Teachers, doctors, dentists, professors, counselors, artists, coaches, students mothers, fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, people who work for non-profit agencies and volunteer in hospitals and for libraries, people who are loving, caring, and giving.

And your inspirational stories? I was expecting homey arts and crafts booths at the art festival. Instead I got a formal gallery, a juried art competition, demonstrations by artisans, and a fine art experience for children- and that was a few hours on Saturday morning! Then, I met kids who talked about their church youth group like it was the greatest thing since sliced bread!

I have seen piles of canned food, a beautiful quilt and prayer shawls. I see beautiful grounds and volunteers on call for broken sinks, fallen trees and confused computer users. I see lay leaders, ushers, greeters, musicians and Sunday school volunteers grace worship, and art that represents 49 festivals, supporting and enhancing the arts.

And then there is this art collection here. I told the children of the Country Day School this week about a people who made sure Native American children knew about Christmas- the true meaning of Christmas, the gift of unconditional love. How the people here collected toys, took them to the reservation for Santa Claus to deliver. How the children learned through your giving the joy of receiving, and how they turned around and made these beautiful things for you.

Now the stories I have told are about the past. Life flows, things change, and our church must too. What we are called to do and be in the future is not the same as the past or the present. But that is just fine. What was meaningful for us in one part of our lives

is good and empowering, but the meaning changes to lure us, to encourage us to stretch our wings to try new things. We cannot abandon our past, but we are not defined by or limited by it.

That is the freedom we find in our faith- that we can move on from what we have done and been and become a new creature. The experience we have had, the gifts that you have, continue, grow, and expand. And they are the are tools and gifts waiting to be used, explored, and motivated to new heights. What we have to do is answer the question: what is God calling Hillcrest to be in the future? Who is it, and how, will we serve? It is all in our perspective, what we open ourselves to see.

Bartimaeus and Bart were able to survive as blind men and could have continued that way. But it was not enough. They were ready to see new things. They threw off the cloaks that bound them to their old way of life. They were willing and able to take a new direction, willing to take the risk and had the confidence and the faith to do it.

We can all do it and be transformed. Individually and as a church together. Let us throw off our old cloaks and get on with our new life together. What vision do you see? Amen.