

"Take heart; get up, he is calling you."

Mark 10:46-52

Northminster Presbyterian Church

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October 25, 2015

She was the daughter of the Billy Graham of her day...great things were expected of her...great pressures. She was to be, so some said, the woman who would prove that a contemporary woman could have faith and a mind...and there was great pressure. She studied in a seminary for women run by her oldest sister....and she married a man her father thought would be ideal, a man she grew to love—who was a teacher at her father's seminary...and so Harriet Beecher became Harriet Beecher Stowe. Her brother became a brilliant preacher as well, and with her husband began to speak out on the moral scourge of the day...slavery.

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But as her husband and brother grew in influence, Harriet was disappointed in herself. She was not living up to the vision she had for her life...she felt such frustration and such a depression that despite her education and her insights—many of which helped shape her husband's sermons—still no one would take her seriously when she expressed a theological opinion...she loved her brother and her father, but found their attitudes toward her to be patronizing...thankfully her husband respected her...but as loathe as she was to admit it...that wasn't enough. And it became a catalyst for a deep depression. If we think mental illness has a stigma today, it is nothing compared to the views of the mid-19th century...and so imagine the extra pressure of shame that fell upon her when Harriet began to experience ever increasing bouts of hysterical blindness—a psychological condition that essentially causes the brain to shut down some or all of the visual stimuli it is receiving.

Ms. Stowe's fits of hysterical blindness became so dangerous for her and her family that she had to leave her husband and two small children in the care of another relative as she voluntarily entered a residential clinic and sought answers...and a way forward...

When you stop and think about it...we are a nation that has been proven over time to have our own bouts of hysterical blindness. In Harriet's century, the prevailing views about poverty and hunger were truly myopic. The churches might be rallied to care for the destitute, but absent a natural disaster or national economic collapse...those who were poor, those who were powerless, were generally perceived to have earned their lot in life.

Anyone who didn't have a family to look after them in the tough times surely had done something to become estranged and likely deserved their fate...and for most of the last century, we have been unwilling to see that our foreign and domestic political and economic policies have been contributing to a global situation that was driving millions here and abroad into poverty and hunger...

A little more than a half century ago a group of Protestant and Catholic clergy and laypeople began meeting to clear the shadows from their eyes, to learn and to plan...and they formed an organization called Bread for the World. They began the difficult task that many other organizations have also undertaken...to use the clarion call of the gospel to clear our unseeing eyes and to help all to have a clear vision of the needs of the hungry...in our communities, our nation and the world...and inspire us to action...particularly to the hear the call of the gospel to get up...and get involved...using collective political influence to push for just farm and food and economic development policies here and abroad. In some corners of the world, today is Bread for the World Sunday...a day to recommit to keeping our eyes open...to hearing Christ call us out of our unseeing complacency and inviting us to join him on the road, seeking to be good stewards of our earthly power for others.

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In today's gospel lesson, Jesus cures someone...not of radical blindness, at least not as we are told...but of some physical malady...to suggest otherwise is to try and make God fit inside our limited understanding of health and physical existence... but Jesus does not take credit for what happens today...the blind see in this story because of their own faith...because of what I want to call hysterical vision...

Consider the blind man Barthimeus...he is reduced to begging to survive...his condition utterly separates him from the culture, for it makes him unclean and unworthy...but for some reason...some reason we are never told...Barthimeus will not see himself that way...he sees himself as worthy of the blessing of the Son of David, the Messiah...he believes in things that he has not seen...not just about Jesus, but about himself...In his deeply held belief that he is not worthless, that he can receive the mercy of the Messiah as much as any other...he is bold and cries out...in his hysterical sight, "seeing" not only something in himself, but in this strange Rabbi from Galilee.

His faith saves him Jesus says...his hysterical vision becomes real vision in the sovereign reign of this Messiah...just as our faith calls us to see the world and its needs and respond with our own hysterical vision...of the world that

can be where those who have more than enough make provision for those who go hungry...and all are transformed in the process...

Today we also celebrate another kind of hysterical vision ... Almost 500 years ago, Medieval Theologies had so twisted the church that humanity...created in the image of God, was taught not to celebrate God's love but to fear God's wrath...was taught that grace was not something freely given by God in Jesus Christ, but something that was the sole province of the church...was something that could literally be bought or earned...and in the midst of this blindness...there were those whose visions were different, but who all seemed to see God and grace in a very different way...Martin Luther...Jean Calvin...Ulrich Zwingli...John Knox....they had the radical idea...actually they rediscovered a very old idea – that grace was indeed God's free gift...that God's mercy, God's love, is freely offered in Jesus Christ and that our response to that grace is faith, not fear...gratitude, not begrudgingly doing our duty...in hopes of avoiding eternal damnation.

They seemed to hear a calling from the very Christ whose grace they proclaimed...a calling to get up...to take heart, for the Lord had need of them to lead the church in a new, hopeful, grace-full direction. They heeded that call and countless new traditions came from it...and in turn the new vision of God's grace proclaimed by the Reformers led people of great faith and vision within the Roman church to undertake what we now call the Counter-Reformation...and so their heeding God's call changed the entire church...

As she healed body, mind and spirit, Harriet Beecher Stowe found freedom...freedom in no longer being the one who was expected to be the example...freedom in not fearing what others thought...but in listening...listening to what she encountered as the call of God...the call of Christ specifically...to use her voice...or as she said...to be a conduit for the call to heal her nation from a great blindness—a blindness to the humanity of those who had been considered non-human...three-fifths of a person under census laws...and so she began to write... putting into words the sense that God was saying take heart, get up for Christ has need of her to change the hearts and minds of a nation...a nation she felt Christ was calling into transformation.

Her words were not dry religious conviction that slavery was an abomination before God, but instead, her disdain of the culture that oppressed both slaves and women became a novel, "Uncle Tom's Cabin," which has almost universally been identified as the most influential book of the 19th century...because it opened a nation's eyes to evils they had too long chosen not to see...

When he was finally introduced to Mrs. Stowe in the midst of the Civil War, President Lincoln was heard to observe, "Well, I had to meet the woman who wrote the book that started this war..." For Harriet, freedom from oppression gave her sight....freedom from the strictures that said she had nothing to say...listening to the voice that called her forward in hope and healing...

Today we celebrate the hysterical vision of the Reformers who broke the church out of a legacy of fear and corruption...and the hysterical vision of a poor blind man on the side of the road...

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We also are invited to our own moments of hysterical vision...to those moments when we take the time to listen...to take heart...and to get up out of those attitudes, and fears and narrow visions....and get moving...for Christ is calling each of us...and all of us...not only for our own healing...but so that we might be agents of healing for the world...so that we might be bearers of grace...no longer experiencing the world or ourselves with blinders on...but seeing the world in all of its complex beauty... seeing the ways we have been blessed beyond our merit...and seeing our callings clearly...with the vision of the one who grants us vision to see with compassion...and to respond, seeking justice, seeking peace, seeking unity in the Spirit with all humankind.

Like Harriet Beecher Stowe, let us hear the call to use our voices for the liberation of the oppressed...like the founders of the Bread for the World, let us use our power and resources to break chains of poverty and hunger that have been too long ignored...like those Reformers let us joyfully proclaim the Grace of God in Christ who so loves us that nothing we can do can ultimately separate us from hope and joy...like that little man on the side of the road, let us rise as those who are healed and granted clear vision and follow Christ where he leads us...

And, sure, maybe the gifts God is calling each of us to offer and use won't have near the same impact Harriet's did...or save generations from hunger and want, or revive the church with a new and hopefully vision....but how can we ever know if we don't take heart...get up and get going...for Christ is calling us yet again. Thanks be to God.