

WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO FOR YOU?

(Jesus poses the all-important question to the blind man. What would you answer if He asked you?)

I have three stories to tell. I have told them before at various times. One is pastoral. One is personal. One is relational. All three are connected to the gospel for today.

First story. The year is 1977 I am teaching high school for the first time at Roman Catholic High. I have just finished four years as Assistant Pastor at St. Pius X parish in Broomall. Late in the fall I receive a call from a family I knew from Broomall. They had one child and could have no more. Their little girl Nicole who was about 7 years old and in the second grade had been diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor and was in Children's Hospital. I knew the little girl from the schoolyard at Pius and she was a spunky little pony-tailed girl. Her parents asked me to visit her at Children's. So I did and she was glad to see me. That began a series of weekly visits to her hospital room as her health declined. Her family was very faithful and kept daily vigil for months.

The tumor put pressure on the optic nerve and she lost her sight. Later there was a metastasis and some radical surgery was called for in order to save her life and so she lost her arm. All along I prayed as hard and as fervently as I knew how to pray. I asked the Lord for a healing to be hers. It had been months. And then one day this sense grew within me that the healing had been given. I was overjoyed. Later that day I received a phone call telling me that she had died. I could not believe it. I was crushed, and angry and bordering on hopelessness.

Her mom and dad asked if I would celebrate her funeral Mass. The night before there was a viewing and I knew it would be a crush of people. I arrived early at the funeral home and before I got in the door was met by her cousin who asked me if I could hear his confession because he wanted to go to communion at her Mass the next day. We ducked into the front parlor and I heard his confession. He told me his brother wanted to go too. Was that okay? Sure. I heard confessions without a break for two solid hours as word spread. All those people who had been away from the sacrament for years were slowly coming back. All because of her. And then I began to see a different healing and then I began to realize that this little girl had been in on it the whole time. An awful lot of people were reconciled to the Lord that day through that little girl. And there was healing far deeper than her cure. My prayer actually had been answered and the healing had been given. It's just that the Lord had a different healing in mind than I did but one that little Nicole agreed to. I believe that.

On the Thanksgiving weekend 1985 was the last time I took an alcoholic drink. That was thirty-three years ago. Almost no one in this church today knew me then. I was a very different person. Likable but out of control. That Thanksgiving I went to my mom's early in the afternoon. My brothers arrived in time to watch the football games and we shared a couple of beers. There were mixed drinks and hors d'oeuvres before dinner and some wine with dinner. After dinner and dessert there were after dinner drinks. I remember getting back to the Rectory in Lansdowne around ten o'clock that night. And then I did something that made eminent sense at that time. I fixed myself a double before going to bed. When I went to bed, sadly, I was drunk.

In the morning I awoke with a hangover. Not the first time. But this time there was something else. This time I sensed that there was something that was happening to me in my body because of the alcohol. I felt as if my body was beginning to undergo a change physiologically. It scared me. I knew I had a problem and that the problem had been getting worse. I probably had had a drinking problem for a couple of years by that time but I was intent on not letting anybody know. I was 38 years old. I was not happy. No one really knew that because I wore the mask of a happy person, a happy priest but I wasn't happy. I didn't like myself. I didn't love myself. As a matter of fact there were some days when I hated myself, hated who I was and what I was doing. There were even moments of self-loathing. And I was the cause.

I was doing this to myself. If someone else had been doing this to me and making me feel like this I would have hated them but I was doing it.

I also knew something else—two things actually. I didn't want to do this anymore. And. I couldn't stop on my own. I literally got down on my knees and begged God for help. I didn't want to do this anymore. I asked the Blessed Mother, the Mother of priests, to help me. I started saying the rosary. And there was just one other person in whom I confided and that person was just the right person, giving me the support and encouragement that I needed. The Lord and His Mother did help me. Not only do I no longer drink but the very urge to drink is gone. The desire to pick up a drink does not exist in me anymore. It is gone—by God's grace and Mary's intervention. My part was to affirm over and over again that I didn't want to do this anymore and that I didn't have to. Some have said to me that I drink wine at Mass. That's not a drink. That is the Blood of Christ. When I pick up the chalice I am not picking up a drink, I am picking up the Blood of the Lord. I believe that. What do you want me to do for you? Lord set me free. I believe He did that.

In the fall of 2003 my best friend Msgr. Tom Herron told me that he had been diagnosed with a rare form of cancer that was inoperable. They were going to radiate and do chemo but the outlook did not seem promising. Immediately I began to pray. This was my best friend, of forty years. My traveling companion. The one who knew my heart and soul like few others. It took seven months for him to die. It was not an easy death. It was by no means a glorious death. A few days before he died they siphoned 11 liters of liquid from his abdomen. Eleven. In the beginning I had prayed for a healing of his cancer but soon I changed my prayer. Lord would you please heal in Tom that which is most in need of healing? Whatever that may be. And before he died I saw that healing. I saw the return to the Tom I had first known and grown to love. Life is hard sometimes and we change and harden. He had. But then there was this gentleness that returned in the process and I knew my prayer had been answered. I believe that.

The blind young man, Bartimaeus is called over before Jesus and asked a simple question. What do you want me to do for you? These stories are three occasions when I found myself in a very similar situation as Bartimaeus. I really struggled to get my request just right but even when I didn't the Lord gave the best answer. When you find yourself in similar circumstances, don't be afraid. Ask. Ask for what you want of Our Lord and then trust. Trust that He will do that which is the very best even if it doesn't make full sense to you at the time. Bartimaeus did and in the process came to see. And then he followed Jesus on the path.