

The Twenty First Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 25, Year B
October 25, 2009
Mark 10:46-52

In an article Friday on CNN.com, columnist Ruben Naverrette quotes a recent Newsweek interview with Maurice Sendak, the author of the children's book *Where the Wild Things Are* – which has recently been made into a feature length movie.

As you will hear in the exchange that follows, Sendak, now over 80 years old, isn't concerned - at all - with being politically correct, or - I assume - being liked by parents today.

However, what Sendak says is important, if contentious, and I want to explore what he says and Naverrette's response in light of the Gospel story we just heard.

The Newsweek Reporter asks:

"What do you say to parents who think the *Wild Things* film may be too scary?"

Sendak replies:

"I would tell them to go to hell. That's a question I will not tolerate."

"Because kids can handle it?" asks the reporter.

Sendak replies: "If they can't handle it, go home. Or wet your pants. Do whatever you like. But it's not a question that can be answered."

Sendak: "This concentration on kids being scared, as though we as adults can't be scared. Of course we're scared. I'm scared of watching a TV show about vampires. I can't fall asleep.

It never stops. We're grown-ups; we know better, but we're afraid."

The Reporter continues: "Why is that important in art?"

Sendak: "Because it's truth. You don't want to do something that's all terrifying. I saw the most horrendous movies that were unfit for child's eyes. So what? I managed to survive."

Naverrette includes this exchange in his column and then comments, "I miss the way people used to be. A couple of generations ago, parents didn't worry about whether kids were happy all the time or comfortable 24/7 or wrapped in protective coating. Of course, they didn't want their children hurt. But it's hard to imagine they would have spent much time and effort trying to keep kids from being scared."

Nowadays it's a different story. Alluding to the family of young Falcon Heene, Naverrette says, "While one infamous set of parents could face criminal charges for pretending their son was in a balloon, other parents think nothing of keeping their kids in a bubble."

(see: <http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/10/22/where.the.wild.things.are/index.html>)

Why do we keep our children from seeing scary things? Certainly we do not want intentionally to harm our children. We do not want to go out of our way to traumatize them. But it is, at times, as if we put a bubble around them. A bubble we construct willingly - likely because we are so comfortable within the bubble ourselves.

When we get to the point in Mark's Gospel we just heard, the disciples have been living in a bubble as well. They cannot stand to face what is right before their eyes. Jesus tells them over and over again what they are about to encounter and it is horrifying.

Two chapters ago, directly following the healing of a different blind man, Jesus begins to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and, as the Gospel says, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

You remember what happened next. Peter's response was to rebuke Jesus. Then, Jesus said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan."

These are strong words, you would think they would crystallize things for the disciples, but instead they continue to be blind to what Jesus is trying to show them.

In the next chapter, after the transfiguration and after the healing of a young boy, Jesus again was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.'

This time Mark tells us that the disciples did not understand what Jesus was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Finally, right before the passage we read today, Jesus foretells his death and resurrection for a third time, "They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.'

What would your reaction to Jesus be at this point? Would you close your eyes tight against all that Jesus says, staying safe inside your seemingly secure, though terribly thin, bubble? Or would you look at Jesus, see all that he is saying and follow him "on the way?"

I believe both the CNN columnist and the author of the Gospel want us to understand that fear is an inevitable part of life for ourselves and for all those we love and care for. We cannot avoid fear, but - by God - we can overcome it.

We know the story:

Jesus' life, death and resurrection conquer sin and death.

So, there is nothing left we need to fear.

There is nothing not touched by God, experienced by God, transformed by God.

Yes, life is scary.

There are people, situations, and memories that terrify us.

To some extent fear is necessary for our survival.

To fear is natural – it is like our other senses – to taste, to smell, to feel, to hear, and, of course, to see.

To fear is to be human.

Today, however, we are being told to see beyond our fear. We are being asked to acknowledge our fear, AND acknowledge that fear isn't the end of the story.

If we stay in our bubbles, far from all that can scare us, blind to what Jesus is trying to show us, we will never see what is on the other side of that fear.

Today we hear a story of a miraculous healing. A blind beggar is made to see again. This is a nice story. It was nice of Jesus to heal this blind man. But if healing the blind was Jesus' only mission, we wouldn't be sitting in this church this morning.

We hear about this encounter with Bartimaeus - Mark chooses to relate this story to us, not because it shows the healing power of Jesus, but because it points us beyond the dusty road in Jericho and illustrates for us what is required of Jesus followers.

To follow Christ is to follow Christ, with eyes wide opened, to those places many fear to tread.

To follow Christ is to journey, with eyes wide opened, to the Cross...and to the tomb.

To follow Christ is to wake up, with eyes wide opened, to the promise of Easter.

You see, this story represents a turning point in Mark's Gospel. We are in different territory now. We are no longer wandering around the countryside, following Jesus as he teaches and heals in Galilee. We are reoriented towards Jerusalem, and the Passion of Jesus Christ.

What a time it is for Bartimeaus to regain his sight!

"What is it you want me to do for you," Jesus asks?

"My teacher let me see again," Bartimeaus replies.

"See?"

I can hear Jesus saying to Bartimeaus exactly what he had just said to the disciples.

"See[?] We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him."

Are you sure Bartimaeus? Are you sure it is sight you want? Once you see, you will never be blind again.

Bartimaeus will not get a "do-over."

Bartimaeus responds. Bartimaeus demonstrates his faith and follows Jesus on the way.

For Bartimaeus and for us, there is no turning back.

Bartimaeus doesn't get a "do over" once he finds out what he is in for. And that is okay. He does not need one. And neither do we.

"What do you want me to do for you," Jesus asks his disciples James and John.

"What do you want me to do for you," Jesus asks Bartimaeus.

"What do you want me to do for you," Jesus asks us.

The answer to this question will be different for all of us. We all have different things we want Jesus to do for us, different wounds we want Jesus to heal.

We know Jesus will answer our prayers. And if we haven't figured it out already, we know Jesus will give us much more than we ask for. Jesus will give us what we don't even know we need. And often what Jesus grants us, Jesus demands of us.

Our requests open the bubble that surrounds us. For sure, at times it is difficult even to make the request. It takes risk to ask for what we really want from God: for what we want, God demands.

Yet we ask and we obey, and our led out of the protection of the bubbles we construct and into the future God has transformed.

Bartimaeus was given the gift of sight, and the consequence of that was that he would have to see the brutality of Christ's passion.

We must return to the Gospel and see, though, that the sight he receives and the sight demanded of him was given in the context of one great gift: Mercy.

Bartimaeus saw the brutality of the Cross. Yet, Bartimaeus was there to see the beauty of the Resurrection. Christ gave him sight to that he could see, for himself, the promise of the Resurrection.

We never know exactly what lies out of sight, beyond our request of God. We can be sure it will come with a demand. That is the cost of discipleship.

We can ask anything of God. We have confidence that God will grant it to us. It is not wrong to ask for health or safety or security, or to ask to find love, to taste happiness, to savor joy.

But we ask in recognition of what has already been given to us. We ask with grateful hearts. Hearts that leap, like Bartimaeus did when he felt the nearness of God, when he felt God calling out to him.

We ask recognizing that these gifts are given in an overwhelming context of mercy. The gifts come with an overwhelming responsibility to use them, and, ultimately, that is something to celebrate.

Sendak said that he saw lots of scary movies. He saw things that terrified him. And his response was: So what? I managed to survive.

That's a fine message for all of us, but it doesn't go far enough.

The Gospel story, on the other hand, tells us that there is more to conquering our fear than mere survival. The Gospel story tell us that through facing our fears we can more fully understand the awesome power of God's transforming grace and mercy.

Amen.