

By this point in Luke's gospel, Jesus has told his disciples three times that he is going to Jerusalem to die. They may not understand, but he has set his face like a flint toward the cross, and won't be diverted. Good Friday or bust for the sake of the world. Jesus is headed somewhere with a purpose.

But no sooner does he get going than he stops in his tracks. He stops because he hears the voice of a beggar, calling for mercy, not once, but twice. That Jesus heard at all over the clamor of the crowd traveling with him is a miracle in itself. That he heard and stopped, given his drive to meet his destiny, shows how much he cares. Jesus cares about people in trouble.

The crowd doesn't care. They're caught up in the parade. They've found the next king, and they can't wait until they crown him in Jerusalem. So they tell the blind beggar to keep it quiet. The new leader can't be bothered with the likes of him. Thank goodness the blind man ignores them. You can almost see the gears turning in his head. Jesus is coming by. This might be the man's last chance for healing. He's not going to be quiet. Let the crowd be quiet. So he shouts even louder, "Son of David, have mercy on me." Jesus brings the procession to a halt. The crowd grows still. Jesus brings the blind man forward. Then he asks, "How can I help you?" Son of God, Lord of all, Messiah on a mission to save the world, and he stops to help a blind beggar on

the periphery of the crowd. Jesus cares about people, otherwise helpless people, and works to make them well.

When I was in seminary, I took a class on Martin Luther King, Jr. Fascination class; fascinating person. It's hard to imagine the Civil Rights movement without him. His words kept the engine turning, the marches going. But Martin gave his handlers fits. They never could get him to the stage on time because Martin always stopped to talk to people. The people called to him, and he heard. He took time to ask them how Aunt Flo was doing, and how the oldest was surviving that first year in college. It drove the people in charge of his scheduling crazy, always pulling at his coattails to get him to come along. But we want that in a leader, and you can't fake it, at least not for long: someone who cares enough to stop and listen.

Jesus starts toward Jerusalem and stops outside of Jericho for the same reason: his mission of compassion. Whether he's moving toward the cross or standing still on the street, whether he's living or dying, Jesus is seeking and saving people, drawing them into the scope of God's healing love. Jesus spent his whole life caring for people.

After giving the beggar his sight, Jesus starts moving again. This time he makes it into Jericho, but I'll swun if he doesn't stop again. His ears caused him to put on the brakes the first time; now

it's his eyes. As Jesus passes through the streets, he sees a wee little man who has climbed up a sycamore tree. We know who he is, the crowd knows who he is, and Jesus knows him, too.

Zacchaeus the tax collector. Why would Jesus stop the flow for him?

Tax collectors didn't have many friends. They did Rome's dirty work, collecting revenue to keep the empire going. They made their living collecting more than was owed, and soldiers went along with them to rough up those who didn't comply.

Zacchaeus was the guy who walked into your home and took the money you were going to use to feed and clothe your family, and you couldn't do anything about it. And Zacchaeus was chief among the tax collectors. Let's just say that's no way to win friends and influence people.

But when Jesus comes along, he stops under the tree where Zacchaeus is perched. Jesus was on his way to die for sinners. But he loved sinners long before the cross. So he looked up at Zacchaeus and saw that he had lost part of his name. Everyone was so busy labelling him as tax collector and sinner that they forgot his true self. Not Jesus. He knew who Zacchaeus was even if Zacchaeus had forgotten. So he called him by his real name: son of Abraham, a child of the covenant, a member of God's family. "Get down out of that tree, Zacchaeus. You're making dinner for

me tonight." Good gracious, he's not only stopping the parade, he's going to eat with this guy. That day in Jericho, Jesus made a new friend, and the walls of isolation and shame came tumbling down. Jesus cares, even for sinners, especially for sinners.

Before we leave Zacchaeus and the blind man, please take special note of what is obvious from these stories. Jesus cares about the whole person, body and soul, the physical and spiritual aspects of human life. Jesus doesn't divide folks into different segments and then pay attention to the part that is deemed most important. He cares about eyes, hearts, minds and limbs, and he is willing to stop to make the wounded whole. Some even would say he won't stop until not only people, but communities and the entire created order is made well.

And the blind beggar and Zacchaeus are so grateful for their wholesale salvation. We know they are grateful because they act like new people. The blind man jumps up to praise and glorify God. Then, he picks up his own cross to become a follower of Jesus. Zacchaeus makes financial restitution to all those he has harmed, and then some. Salvation becomes something more than a gift received. It reshapes their lives.

In spite of all his stops, Jesus finally made it to the cross, and his friends were sad because they thought that was the end of the line. But God raised him up and brought him to his final

destination. Lord of all, king of kings, everlasting Messiah at God's right hand. By the power of the Holy Spirit, he is still present in our world, travelling about the cities and towns, still seeking and saving. Though he's not here, he's here, listening and looking along the way for people who need him because now and forever he cares.

This is a personal question: what might lead him to your house? Is there a reason you might cry out to him for mercy? Nobody has an easy life. Everyone's dealing with something, even if he or she has a twenty-twenty vision and 900 friends on facebook. The blind man and Zacchaeus are extreme examples of the width and depth of Christ's concern, but they aren't the only ones about whom Jesus cares. If you were to cry out, Jesus might very well stop the parade for you.

I've heard that the first step toward help is admitting you have a problem. Denial finally has to give way to reality. No more pretending that we're walking through buttercups and roses every day while the birds sing. Zacchaeus and the blind beggar were lucky in one way. Their issues were so public they couldn't be hidden. If we decided not to hide anymore, what would draw Jesus toward us?

He cares that the past still haunts us with unresolved guilt and shame. He cares that our minds are showing their age,

misfiring more often and leaving us without answers we used to know by heart. He cares that our children are suffering for natural reasons and for no reason at all. He feels for us when diseases threaten our health though there is still so much life to live. We don't have to convince him that we're worth his attention. He sees our plight, and if we call out to him, he will hear us.

Sometimes that's all we need: someone who cares enough to come close to our suffering. The loving presence of another person brings healing in itself. But Jesus promises more than presence. He promises salvation, restoration to wholeness. Zacchaeus and the blind beggar got a big swig of God's redemption when Jesus stopped for them. They didn't get the whole drink. None of us do. Salvation is complete only after this life when we are raised from the dead with Christ to worship and enjoy God forever. But we can still get a taste of what's coming because Jesus cares and works to make our lives as full and complete as they can be this side of heaven.

So as he comes by today, what do you need to tell him? What does he need to see? Susan Elliott, author and counselor, was in a complicated and abusive relationship. When she tried to break free, she was surprised how difficult that could be. Eventually, a court date was set for custody of the children, and her lawyer insisted that she had to testify. Susan says her legs were so

weak with fear she barely made it up the courthouse steps. When she took the stand, she spoke in the faintest whisper. But, she says, the more she spoke, the stronger she felt. By the end of her testimony, she was a different person, confident and making progress. She still had a long way to go, but telling her story was like medicine for the soul.

Find your voice. Speak your peace. Call for help. Climb up high where Jesus can't miss you, and don't worry what the neighbors think. Reach out to be made well. God will hear you because God is like Jesus.

He cares.