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Asking the Blind: Faith and Grace in a Delivery Room

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As a seminarian in Louisville, Kentucky, I was challenged to discern what kind of ministerial vocation I wanted to pursue. I felt my “calling” was to teach, but even teaching, if done with care and concern for the students, could in some ways be “ministerial.” My greater concern was with what model my teaching or “ministry” would follow. Would I be the sage on the stage (or in the pulpit), imparting words of wisdom and knowledge? Or would it be more organic, flowing from the relationships I developed with my class or my congregation?

Eventually, the model I chose was one I found in the gospel of Mark when Jesus encounters the blind man Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52). Jesus comes upon this blind man, one of the countless beggars asking for handouts at the gates of the city, and he asks him, “What do you want me to do for you?” Are you serious, Jesus? It is obvious to everyone there what Bartimaeus needs. He’s blind, and because of his blindness he has no way of making a living and must beg to survive. He needs to be cured of his blindness! But instead of assuming Bartimaeus’s need and helping him based on that assumption, Jesus, by asking the question, gives Bartimaeus a voice in the form and direction Jesus’s ministry (or teaching?) will take. And this experience, this opportunity, so empowers Bartimaeus that Jesus proclaims, “your faith has healed you.”

This model has been crucial for me ever since, never more importantly than when I was a student chaplain at University Hospital in Louisville. One evening I was on call in the emergency room, my favorite place to work, when I received word from the delivery room that a Seventh Day Adventist woman who had just delivered a stillborn child requested that a

chaplain come and baptize her child. I was the only chaplain around, but at the time I was a Baptist. You may or may not know that Baptists don't believe in infant baptism, only in believer's baptism. (Baptists still find a way to welcome children into the community—they just call it a baby dedication.) Moreover, I had never done a baptism before. How could I in good conscience baptize this infant?

When I arrived in the delivery room, I explained my dilemma to the nursing staff, who, despite listening sympathetically, dressed me in a surgical gown and provided me with a basin of water. Apparently, they had done this before, and they needed the delivery room again for another delivery. Nurses are amazing at finding ways to get you to do the right thing even when you don't want to.

Upon entering the room, I saw a tired African American teenager lying on a birthing table lovingly caressing a fully formed, beautiful but lifeless, little girl. The woman's older brother was there mumbling something about it probably being God's will because the child was conceived illegitimately, which was clearly causing emotional pain for the girl. What is it with self-righteous older brothers? Why do they think they can speak for God words of judgment and condemnation to their siblings who are experiencing grief and despair (Luke 15:29-30)? Whispering to the nurse, I asked her to find a way to get the brother out of the room which she did with great skill and grace.

Thankful for his departure, I came to the young woman's side anxious about what to say, unsure of what to do, angry at her brother's rantings. Yet as I looked into this woman's tearful and soulful eyes, all I could think of was to ask, "What do you want me to do for you?" She looked at me and asked me to baptize her child so that her spirit and her daughter's spirit could be at peace with God. Full of uncertainty and doubt about what I was doing, I took the child in my arms, asked what her name was, dipped my thumb and forefinger into the basin of water, and anointed her head with the water saying, "I baptize you in the name of the Creator, Christ, and Comforter." Then I placed the child back into her mother's arms.

Baptists say there is nothing sacramental about the ritual of baptism; no saving grace comes from it. Perhaps. In that ritual act in that delivery room, however, I experienced the presence of God in a way I have seldom since, an experience I can only describe as grace. As I looked at the woman, I could see that she had experienced it as well. The peace the woman requested had come to her, hopefully to her daughter, and, unexpectedly, to me. And this experience enabled me to proclaim confidently to this young woman, "your faith has made you, made us, well."

Through this and countless other experiences, I have learned that if ministry or teaching is about enabling others to find wholeness, whether intellectual, social, or spiritual, then that work will best be accomplished when we take seriously the voice of those with whom we work. When we intentionally ask the blind, the homeless, our students, "What do you want me to do for you?" and respectfully incorporate their responses into our work, we affirm their worth and dignity, and empower them to have faith in themselves, in us, and perhaps in their God. And

this faithfulness will go a long way to meeting human need and enabling all of us to become whole.

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