

October 24, 2021 – The Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost

“A towel, according to Douglas Adams in his classic sci-fi novel *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, is about the most massively useful thing an interstellar hitchhiker can have. Partly it has great practical value. You can wrap it around you for warmth as you bound across the cold moons of Jaglan Beta; you can lie on it on the brilliant marble-sanded beaches of Santraginus V, inhaling the heady sea vapors; you can sleep under it beneath the stars which shine so redly on the desert world of Kakrafoon; use it to sail a miniraft down the slow heavy River Moth; wet it for use in hand-to-hand-combat; wrap it round your head to ward off noxious fumes or avoid the gaze of the Ravenous Bugblatter Beast of Traal (such a mind-boggingly stupid animal, it assumes that if you can't see it, it can't see you); you can wave your towel in emergencies as a

distress signal, and of course dry yourself off with it if it still seems to be clean enough.”

More importantly, a towel has immense psychological value. For some reason, if a strag (that is, a non-hitch hiker) discovers that a hitch hiker has his towel with him, he will automatically assume that he is also in possession of a toothbrush, face flannel, soap, tin of biscuits, flask, compass, map, ball of string, gnat spray, wet weather gear, space suit etc., etc. Furthermore, the strag will then happily lend the hitch hiker any of these or a dozen other items that the hitch hiker might accidentally have "lost." What the strag will think is that any man who can hitch the length and breadth of the galaxy, rough it, slum it, struggle against terrible odds, win through, and still knows where his towel is, is clearly a man to be reckoned with.

A cloak, according to the gospel author Mark, is thrown off by Bartimaeus, blind beggar and son of Timaeus, as he springs up amidst a large crowd to meet Jesus and answer his call.

Mark, however, is much more thrifty with his words than the late Englishman Adams. That Bartimaeus does this in Mark's Gospel seems like an odd detail to throw into the brief narrative.

But because Mark is so economical, I think it's particularly valuable to pay attention to his choice in words and details. A scholar of Mark offers a reading between the evangelist's written lines and sees what seems to parallel the science fiction classic.

"The cloak here is not only an aesthetic garment," he says. "For individuals living below poverty levels in first-century Palestine, the cloak is a piece that provides warmth in hostile weather conditions, a valuable piece that would allow them to

sleep at night or to throw it in front of them to collect money.

The garment is also a sign of status and power.

“Although the passage portrays Bartimaeus as belonging to the lowest of social strata, the garment represents the little power he owns.”

The towel, if you read between the lines of Adams, is an irreplicable item of last resort to fool someone who doesn't know the ins and outs of the resourceful galactic hitchhiker's hustle. We, as the audience catch the author's little wink that lets us know the non-traveler assumes something that's most likely not the case. The hitchhiker hasn't simply misplaced one of their essentials. They just don't have it. If they're asking, they're probably down to nothing left but that last shred of hope as tangibly represented by that humble towel. And yet, as the universe allows, it's still enough.

The cloak for Bartimaeus, is more readily apparent what it is. There's no hiding that his asking is what we call begging. And his audience of one – forget the fickle crowd that surrounds these two men – is an audience who knows very well what Bartimaeus is walking away from.

It's not much, but physically speaking, it's his everything. Compare this with the rich man Jesus had recently encountered. He has a lot and can't even *begin* to part with it all. That man walked away sad and we'll never know for certain what happened in his life after that.

But for Bartimaeus, Jesus recognizes the depth and persistence of his faith. Without it, he doesn't leave that scene that day with his sight. He is not – at least not *yet* – restored.

Bartimaeus trusts he can lose everything. He can even *choose* to give up his very last thing. His last physical, tangible piece of something to hold on to. That item that has been his

last resort for as long as he can remember, that's allowed him to build back again whenever he's been relieved of everything else.

Whether we have chosen to or not, the pandemic has removed from our own humble tool kits most, if not all, of our favorite, comfortable fallbacks. The coping strategies and mechanisms, good, bad, indifferent and otherwise we have developed an ability to rely on. And we are left with our faith in Jesus.

And maybe that isn't the comfort the crowd tells us it's *supposed to be*. Because in each of our faith journeys, God doesn't always feel as close to us as the Word and all the theology built upon it tells us that God is. And that's OK. It's like that sometimes.

Jesus knows us and meets us where we are. Sometimes it's intimidating to hear his rebuke of his disciples when they

get it wrong, in no small part because we know we aren't immune to getting all this God stuff wrong, too, if not even wronger. Undoubtedly, Bartimaeus' theology, his understanding of God, is some degree of wrong. I actually tend to believe we are *all* in our frail and imperfect humanity wrong about *who* God is and *how* God loves us, to varying degrees. And that's OK. God doesn't need us to have it all – or really all that much at all – right to love us and to affirm us and to lead us on a better path.

But faith, someone I visited this week told me, if the size of a mustard seed can move mountains. If you haven't willed an Olympic or a Cascade peak to budge yet by the will of your faith, know that you are not alone in that shortcoming. But also, hear the advice that I was generously granted ... that means that maybe your faith may not even be as great as some tiny speck but it is still sufficient. It is still enough for God to see you and me through. It may not seem like much at all, but it's

**the most useful thing a traveler on the journey of faith in this
confounding world can have. Amen.**