

Celebrating 175 Years of God's Faithfulness

By the Rev. Brandon Ashcraft

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Today is an exciting day for St. Paul's as we commemorate our 175th anniversary as a parish! If you haven't already done so, I encourage you to view the fantastic exhibit that begins in the South Wing and ends in Tucker Hall. It tells the story of our history through photos and brief commentaries and features several of our past rectors. As you travel back in time to learn about St. Paul's history, you'll meet rectors like...Frederick Brooks, our youngest rector, who was called in the late 1860s at the age of only 25. The parish greatly expanded in his time but, sadly, he died in a tragic accident at the young age of 32. And there's Theodore Evans, who served during World War II. He oversaw the erection of St. Martin's Chapel, and was the first rector in the diocese to introduce coffee hour. Then there's our longest-serving rector, Walter Breed, who served for a whopping 32 years (Jeanne: You only have 27 years to go to beat his record!).

It's ironic that on the same day we celebrate the achievements of past rectors, we hear a passage from Hebrews that highlights, of all things, the shortcomings of priests. To be fair, the author of Hebrews is writing about the Levitical priesthood of the Jewish temple. But his observations can apply to clerical leaders of any age. Because his primary criticism of priests is that they're temporary. Eventually, they have to be replaced. (Even the tenure of Walter Breed ended eventually!) So, while temple priests come and go, Hebrews tells us that Jesus "holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever."

For centuries, Christians have ascribed three distinct Old Testament offices to Jesus: prophet, priest, and king. Hebrews, more than any other book, focuses on Jesus as priest. And there are two parts to his priesthood. The first has to do with sacrifice. It was the duty of Levitical priests to offer sacrifices in the temple, and these sacrifices had to be repeated daily. But Jesus made a distinctly different kind of sacrifice – the once-and-for-all sacrifice of his life – a sacrifice that never has to be repeated.

His other priestly function was that of intercessor. Hebrews tells us that Jesus "always lives to make intercession for [us]." Jesus, the Great High Priest, is our never-failing intercessor. Within the life of the Trinity, God the Son intercedes on our behalf to the God the Father (or God the Creator). This is why so many of our prayers end with the phrase "through Jesus Christ our Lord" because we are making our prayers to God the Father *through* his Son Jesus Christ. And when we offer our prayers through Jesus, our Great High Priest, our prayers become like holy incense before the throne of God.

To put this framework in perspective, consider your own life experience...has there ever been a time when you needed someone to intercede for you? Someone to advocate for you? Someone to plead on your behalf? I know I've had plenty of these occasions in my own life. Times when I made mistakes with real consequences. Times when I simply could not save myself and had to rely on the benevolence of others to intercede for me. This is the role that Jesus plays for us, and this is very good news! Jesus is constantly working on our behalf. Indeed, Jesus *delights* in making intercessions for us. I know this can be hard to wrap our minds around. But if you've ever had anyone else pray for you, this is in many ways just like that – only Jesus is the one who is praying. What would our lives look like if we could put our trust and confidence in the power of Jesus' intercession?

We get a glimpse of such a life in the story of Bartimaeus from today's gospel. Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, was confident that Jesus could and would intercede for him. So, he pursued Jesus relentlessly. Even as the crowds protested, Bartimaeus just kept crying out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" When he is called forward to meet Jesus, Bartimaeus throws off his cloak, springs to his feet, and approaches Jesus with confidence. His decision to throw off his cloak may seem, at first, like an incidental detail. But we can safely assume that Bartimaeus' cloak was his only possession in the entire world. His only protection from the elements. The closest thing he had to shelter. He's willing to risk all that he has, because he has complete faith in Jesus' power to save him. He has total trust in Jesus' ability to make him whole. When Jesus says, "What do you want me to do for you?" Bartimaeus knows how to answer the question: "My teacher, let me see again." If Jesus is our never-failing intercessor, then this question Jesus asks Bartimaeus – "What do you want me to do for you?" – it's a question Jesus asks of us, too.

It's a fitting question for us to consider on this day of our anniversary celebration. For 175 years, we have been the beneficiaries of God's faithfulness, but the future is uncertain. With that in mind, how would we, as the St. Paul's community, answer Jesus' question: "What do you want me to do for you?" To be sure, St. Paul's is strong, vibrant, and healthy. At the same time, the challenges facing churches in our nation right now are very real. The precipitous decline in church attendance and membership paints a dire picture that can be awfully hard to look at. We can trust that the church will endure, but we cannot trust that it will endure exactly as we have known it. But we need not fear. We need not despair. It is precisely in these spaces of uncertainty that transformation so often happens. It is in these spaces of uncertainty that we discover new life and new possibility. After all, we worship the God of resurrection.

Remember: in the end, it was Bartimaeus' faith that saved him. Even before Bartimaeus received his gift of sight, he had faith that Jesus would grant it. So, Jesus says to Bartimaeus, "Go; your faith has made you well." Our answer to Jesus' question, it seems, is less important than our willingness to have faith that he will hear us. As we give thanks for 175 years of St. Paul's, I pray that we can face our future with a faith like the faith of Bartimaeus. I pray that we, too, can have the courage to cast off our cloaks and put our whole trust in God's faithfulness. All this I pray through Jesus Christ, our never-failing Intercessor and Great High Priest. Amen.