

In 1997's film *As Good as It Gets*, actor Jack Nicholson plays Melvin Udall, a surly, cantankerous, misanthropic, clinically diagnosed obsessive-compulsive who also happens to write best-selling Romance novels. The film is described as a dramatic comedy, but all of the laugh lines are him treating people horribly. Melvin's life is turned upside down when he is asked to take care of his neighbor's little dog, a dog which had earlier so irritated him that he dumped it down the garbage chute of the New York apartment building. (The dog ends up being OK.) Melvin is asked to care for the dog because his neighbor, a successful artist named Simon, had been hospitalized after a brutal attack in his apartment studio by one of his portrait models. To Melvin's great surprise, he and the dog form a friendship—the only friendship Melvin has had in many years. As a result, an affectionate side of Melvin opens that not even he had seen for a long time. But then, after five weeks, Simon returns home from the hospital, and it is time for the dog to go home. Unable to cope with returning to a life of friendless solitude, Melvin erupts into a full-blown panic attack. He immediately runs to his psychiatrist—obsessively and compulsively avoiding cracks on the sidewalk—and barges into his office. But the psychiatrist refuses to see him without an appointment. As Melvin leaves the office, he walks through the waiting room filled with other patients. Bewildered, lonesome, and frustrated, Melvin stops and says to them, "What if this is as good as it gets?" They have no answer. They look stricken, and he exits.

What if this is as good as it gets? Even in times not marked by economic, political, and global uncertainty, many of us go through periods in which we struggle to even imagine life changing for the better in an enduring way. Every person in this room—whether personally or because of someone we care about—has gone through or is going through what feels like a life-or-death struggle, whether related to health, finances, relationships, coping mechanisms, or the search for personal meaning. Hope is the certain expectation of a future unseen good; hope—as we heard in today's Collect—is one of the Three Cardinal

Virtues, along with Faith and Love. Hope is a gift from God. Hope is necessary for sane living. But in some way or another we are all familiar with crises of hope. When hope fades, our vision for life darkens; when hope dies, we go blind. Despair, which is the absence of hope, is what happens when we are so blinded by our immediate sadness or confusion that we become falsely persuaded that our present state is as good as it gets.

In today's Gospel reading, we hear the story of blind Bartimaeus who cried out to Jesus for mercy and, in response, received his sight. We just heard how Jesus and His disciples were continuing their journey to Jerusalem where, as Jesus had told them, He would be crucified and then three days later rise from the dead. We heard this in Mark's Gospel, which tradition tells us was dictated to Mark by St. Peter who awaited his own crucifixion during the Roman Emperor Nero's persecutions in 64 AD. Peter admits to Mark (and to us) that neither he nor any of the disciples understood Christ's prediction at the time; understandably, they were blind to the reality that just as Christ's suffering is the only way we receive the forgiveness of our sins and the promise of our Resurrection, our suffering in this life is often the only way we are drawn by God's grace into a new kind of life that comes from deeper trust in Him. As Jesus and His disciples walk through Jericho—that great, ancient city where, as we read in the Old Testament book of Joshua, the Hebrews' praises to God with cheers and trumpets made its God-resistant walls come tumbling down—Jesus' disciples will soon see another, different kind of God-resistant wall be torn down.

Bartimaeus sits begging on the side of the road, and when he hears that Jesus is approaching he cries out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me! (Mark 10:47)." His cry is not simply for help. To call Jesus the Son of David is to proclaim that Jesus is the fulfillment of a long-promised, long-awaited, almost-extinguished hope. To call Jesus the Son of David is to celebrate that Jesus is the Messiah, the far-greater descendant of the great King David, the Son of God whom God promised 1,000 years earlier to send to save His people and rule the

nations forever. At first, when the people of Jericho hear Bartimaeus' cry, they resist it: sternly, they tell Bartimaeus to be quiet. But like Joshua's armies, which circled Jericho seven times before it fell, Bartimaeus will not stop. It is a mistake to call Bartimaeus persistent; he is desperate.

Bartimaeus was not born blind. Later, when Jesus asks him what he wants, he says "My teacher, let me see *again* (Mark 10:51)." He has living memories of once being able to see, but for some unexplained reason the light of his sight had gone out. After years of living in blindness, remembering that life used to be so much better but thinking that begging for scraps is now as good as it gets, Bartimaeus has had enough. He has no more cares left to give. At the end of his rope, he refuses to be silenced and calls out for help. When Jesus invites him to come forward, the resistance of the crowd comes tumbling down and they make room for Bartimaeus to go to Jesus and be healed.

Today, among you, it would be fatuous for me to say that when we feel blind to hope, all we need to do is to pray to Jesus for help. Of course we need to do that. But the truth is that whether we are aware of it or not, we are already doing that. St. Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, "the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words (Romans 8:26)." When we feel so sad, lost, overwhelmed, or confused that we cannot even think about praying, God the Holy Spirit is already at work praying within us. He moves in our sighs and tears as much as He does in our words that ascend God-ward. I am allergic to preachers who offer spiritual prescriptions much less advice, but I do want to suggest an additional way that, in our Bartimaeus moments, we can cry out to God for help. We can cry out to one another.

Already, in the silence of even this truly friendly church, we can hear the deafening silence of the Jericho voices of resistance to this possibility; I hear them in our culture, and I hear them within myself. You and I are held captive, frozen onstage in a performance-based

society. We live in a time in which there is an unspoken universal expectation that we have our act together; or if we do not have our entire act together, that we are managing just fine. But for most of us, this is simply not true, and it hasn't been true for a long time. Even back in 1849, Henry David Thoreau wrote that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." The problem is that to those in internal pain, the idea of disclosing our brokenness to others can feel as impossible as giving sight to the blind. I am not saying that we should stand in a pulpit and pronounce our deepest traumas, and I am not saying that we should accost people at the Exchange of Peace or in the church Parking Lot and start a therapy session. All I am saying is that God has given us the gift of one another to, as it were, be Christ for one another. I would ask us to imagine, to wonder for just a moment, that some person in the church—it could be the person in front of us, behind us, or four pews over from us, it could be a person who is making their first visit to St. Peter's today, it could be a person listening on the radio or watching our livestream—some person here might be a part of God's answer to our unspoken cries.

Maybe we do not feel like we know enough people well enough in this church family for such a thought. There's a solution for that. The University of Kansas published a study in 2018 that surveyed the social lives of Freshmen and Sophomores to learn how much time it takes to make a friendship. They found that it takes roughly fifty hours of time together to move from mere acquaintance to casual friend, ninety hours to go from that stage to simple "friend" status, and more than two hundred hours before we consider someone to be a close friend. There is no avoiding the truth that to make a friendship, much less preserve a friendship, we must spend time doing things together. I will only observe that St. Peter's has many things going on that involve spending time together.

Firstly, obviously, there is the approximately hour-and-a-half that we spend together in Sunday morning worship. The word "church" comes from the Scottish word *kirk*, which was

the name of the place where a local Scottish Lord lived. Before then, it came from the Greek word *ecclesia*, which means gathering, or assembly. The Church is where the people of God assemble, and the time we spend together in the worship of God honors Him, centers us, and weaves us together. Secondly, also obviously, are the fellowship events that festoon our calendar: from Pig Roasts to Whitsunday Pilgrimages, from the monthly Thursday night Men's Fellowships to the Tuesday night Sisterhood gatherings. Choral Evensongs, Christmas Pageants, Pancake Suppers, Lenten speaker series, and so many others: as we always say, "the party never stops at St. Peter's." But then there are more focused groups. Over a dozen adults work with our children and youth, either teaching directly or supporting those who teach. There's plenty of room for more. We currently have twenty-nine members who for various reasons cannot leave where they live to worship with us on Sundays, and we are expanding our team of those who visit them and bring Holy Communion to them. There's plenty of room for more. We have forty members of the Daughters of the King, a women's community of dedicated prayer and service. We have almost twenty Ushers, who make newcomers feel welcome. We have a choir. We have teams that focus on community Outreach and on our shared Parish Life. And the list goes on. As we enter the season of our Annual Stewardship Education Program and as we think about the financial gifts we want to make to God through St. Peter's in 2025, we include in our discernment the gifts of time in service to and with one another. In so doing, we help extend the love of God to others; of equal if not greater importance, we find a closer community of friends—true friends—in which we can share our Bartimaeus moments when we need help as we all do, and all shall.

There are a thousand voices around us and perhaps within us that would silence our need to cry out to God for help, that on our worst days would have us believe that this is as good as it gets. But our God of Love, in Whom we live and move and have our being, who on our worst days surrounds us with saints and angels in human form, constantly reassures us in

His Kingdom nothing is as good as it ever gets. In Him and in His love, everything grows to only get better.