

“The M’od Squad”

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

Reformation Sunday

October 27, 2024

⁴⁶They came to Jericho. As [Jesus] and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. ⁴⁷When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁸Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁹Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.”

And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” ⁵⁰So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.” ⁵²Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way. (Mark 10:46-52)

“Mod Squad” is one of those terms that I have heard used, and even used myself, without knowing exactly what it meant. It’s kind of dangerous, really, to throw a term out there not knowing exactly what the full connotation was. What I thought was that it was a way to refer to a small band of people who were kind of hip, edgy, and – doggone it -- knew how to get things done.

Fortunately for me, I was close... at least close enough. Some of you probably know that the term “Mod Squad” originated with a TV series by that name that aired in the late sixties and early seventies. The original squad was a team of three young undercover cops whose job was to infiltrate nefarious elements of youth culture. So it turns out that my usage was basically right, because those original three were hip, edgy, and a little bit dangerous. The “mod” was short for modern, which was reflected both in their stylish clothing and their rejection of outdated social standards.

If you are wondering what in the world this has to do with the healing of Blind Bartimaeus (as he has become known across the centuries), I am about to tell you. Travel back with me to my very first class in seminary, an intensive language seminar on biblical Hebrew. In my day it was always taught by Carson Brisson, one of the best professors I have ever had. It takes a lot to take a subject like biblical Hebrew, which many would agree is a pretty dry subject, and make it not just interesting, but inspirational. Dr. Brisson did that on a daily basis, and he did it with stories.

One of the stories I remember most vividly came when we were studying a very recognizable verse from the Old Testament. It was Deuteronomy 6:5, which says “*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might.*” We talked for a while about the Hebrew words for heart and soul, and then we arrived at the final word in the verse. The Hebrew word is *m’od* (מִּוֹד), which is usually translated as “might” or “strength.” In some places, it can mean the “mind.” But the interesting thing is that, in Hebrew, the word *m’od* is not a noun, which is odd, since might, strength, and the mind all refer to things. In Hebrew, *m’od* is an adverb. So, it does not denote a thing; it describes an action. Literally, *m’od* means “very” or “utterly.” “Therefore,” Dr. Brisson said, “a more



accurate translation of this passage reads that that we are to love God with all of our heart, all of our soul, and all of our 'very.'" And with that, he smoothly shifted into storytelling mode.

It was an evening when his son, Evan, was just a toddler. Evan had an older brother, so it was rare that Evan had his parents all to himself. But on this particular night, Evan's brother had played hard and fallen asleep very early. Dr. Brisson and his wife realized that this was a great chance to spend some quality time just with Evan. Evan was just a little guy in diapers, just beginning to learn to talk -- but he was plenty old enough to recognize this was a rare and wonderful opportunity. He had his parents all to himself, and he was determined to make the most of it.

Even so, as the night got later, Evan started to get really sleepy. Fighting it as best as he could, he began to climb up the stairs. "Playroom," he said. Maybe he figured some toys would give him new energy. So they followed his slow climb up the stairs. But by the time he made it to the top, his little tank was almost empty. At the top of the stairs, he normally would have popped up and started walking, but at this point it took everything he had just to keep crawling toward the playroom. He refused to give up, his eyes locked like lasers on the door of that playroom. He was going to get there, no matter what.

When he was halfway down the hall, his legs gave out. Now he was just pulling himself with his arms like a soldier in the mud. A few feet more, and he stopped, and put his little head down on the carpet. His parents were sure he was finally asleep. But then, in a last gasp of determination, he lifted his little head and threw one little arm out toward the open door of the playroom. And that was it. That was all he had. Four more feet and he would have made it, but just short of the goal he slumped softly down onto the carpet, completely asleep before his head touched the floor. He had given everything he had to give, trying to extend the joy of those moments basking in the unfiltered love and attention of his parents. Carson's wife took a picture of little Evan sleeping there on the hallway floor, and they treasure it to this day – a precious memory of the time their little son showed them what it means for someone to strive with all of their heart, all of their soul, and all of their "very."

That is what I see in Blind Bartimaeus. Who knows how many years he had lived like that, blind and alone, begging for food and help on the roadside. But he had heard about a man named Jesus who could possibly help him. And when he heard that Jesus of Nazareth was coming that way, he was not going to let the opportunity pass by. He gave everything he had, shouting out to him. The other people on the road tried to push him back and quiet him down. But that just made him try even harder and cry out with an even louder voice. Bartimaeus called out with the fullness of his heart, his soul, and his *m'od* – his might, his strength, his "very."

It is an appropriate message for us on this Reformation Sunday, as we reflect on the rich theological tradition in which we now stand. The people who led the movement to reform and change the church in the sixteenth century were shushed and silenced at every turn. But they were convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that the church of Jesus Christ had, in many ways, become blind. Having drifted away from its scriptural moorings, the church was beset with schisms and burdened by heresies. When these problems were raised, they were beaten, imprisoned, sent off into exile. And still they persisted, committing themselves fully and completely to a vision of a church with Jesus Christ as its head, resting firmly on the foundation of scripture, a priesthood of all believers whose salvation depended not on earthly works, but solely on faith.

Next September, a group of us will travel to Scotland to walk paths that some of the most passionate and committed Reformers walked. That will include a stop in the ancient city of St. Andrews, where at some point we will gather around a stone obelisk in the middle of town known as the Martyrs' Monument. It was erected in memory and in honor of four Protestant men, all of whom were martyred in St. Andrews between 1520 and 1560. At that time, St. Andrews was the site of the largest cathedral in Scotland, renowned in all of Europe. It was also the setting for important confrontations over issues that defined the Reformation. Pastor Patrick Hamilton was first to be burned at the stake, his punishment for preaching and teaching the doctrines of Martin Luther. Henry Forest came next, executed for owning a copy of the New Testament printed in the English language. George Wishart, who was the author of an influential Reformed confession and was a major influence on John Knox, was burned at the stake for heresy by the Catholic Church. Walter Myln died shortly thereafter, as punishment for advocating that clergy should be allowed to marry. These are but four of the stories of Reformers who refused to be silenced, refused to yield, and gave everything they had to give in an effort to love God and the church with all of their heart, all of their soul, and all of their strength.

May we have the courage to stand with the Reformers of old, who held the line on their principles in the face of mortal danger.

May we have the faith to cry out with Blind Bartimaeus, who would not quit until the Lord gave him true sight.

And may we be led by little children like Evan Brisson, who expended every ounce of energy he had for just a few more moments of pure love and joy.

This is the legacy that we honor and remember today, a legacy of men and women who were willing to give all they had in service to God. In their own way, they were hip, edgy, and ahead of their time. They were more than a little bit dangerous, but – doggone it – they knew how to get things done. They were not just Mod Squad. They were the M'od Squad, and the faith by which they lived and died is the faith to which we aspire.

Amen.