

How many of you spend time on Facebook? (At least half the congregation raised their hands).

Me too.

And I have a number of friends on Facebook – 634 at last count – many of whom I barely know. But they are more than willing to share their thoughts with me.

Some time back one of my FB friends shared a picture with me that had this thought:
“Smoking weed doesn’t make me a bad person,
just like going to Church doesn’t make you a good person.”

Now, that offended me.

If they’d simply said “Smoking weed doesn’t make me a bad person” I’d have been ok with that I guess. But whoever had created that picture message felt compelled to pull God and His church into the argument... and that annoyed me.

And when I get annoyed I just have to speak up, so I posted this response:

“You’re right.

Smoking weed doesn’t mean you’re a bad person.

And going to church doesn’t mean you’re a good person.

And taking your car to the mechanic doesn’t mean you’ll get your car fixed.

And going to the hospital doesn’t mean you’ll be healed of what ails you.

BUT those are the places to go if those are the results you want.”

My point is this:

If I want certain things to happen in my life then there are certain places I need to be, places I need to go and things I need to do.

Now, I want you to hold that thought for a minute as we look at our text this morning.

Jesus has come to a town called Bethsaida. And while He’s there, there are some people bring their friend to Jesus to be healed of his blindness. Now, that’s not unusual, because Jesus healed all kinds of people during His ministry.

- He healed lepers
- And cripples
- And demoniacs
- And raised the dead.
- And of course He healed a bunch of people who’d been blind... just like this man.

There doesn't seem to be anything Jesus can't do!

But not this time.

This time it almost seems like Jesus can’t heal this man.

All through His ministry Jesus healed people... miraculously

He would heal them by merely saying they were healed (Mk 7:29, John 4:50)

Or He healed people by letting them touch Him (Mt. 9:20; 14:36)

Or He healed people by Him touching them (Mark 6:5)

The lame walked... the deaf heard... dumb spoke.

And ALL were healed immediately.
But not this time!

"He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, 'Do you see anything?' He looked up and said, 'I see people; they look like trees walking around.'" (Mark 8:23-24)

That's not healed!
It's close, but it's not real impressive.

ILLUS: It's kind of like going to the eye doctor and getting glasses that let you see "kind of good". That's ok, I suppose... but it's not really what you were expecting. If you get glasses from the Optometrist you would expect to see perfectly... immediately.

But this guy didn't see perfectly... immediately.
"Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly." (Mark 8:25)

It took Jesus TWO times to heal this guy!
Jesus never has to do that!!!
NOBODY has ever had to be touched TWICE by Jesus to be healed.

So why does this man need to be touched twice?
I mean, was Jesus off His game that day?
Did He get up on the wrong side of the bed?
Had He not had His morning coffee?

Or was there something else going on here?
Well consider these thoughts:

1st – before Jesus healed the man... He took him outside of town.
"He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village." (Mark 8:23)

2nd – after Jesus healed the man, He told him NOT to return to Bethsaida
"Jesus sent him home, saying, 'Don't go into the village.'" (Mark 8:26)

What's this all about?
Why heal the man OUTSIDE Bethsaida and then tell him not go back there?

Well, Bethsaida doesn't have a very good reputation with Jesus. In Matthew 11:21 Jesus cries out: "...Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes."

Woe to Bethsaida?
What on earth was wrong with Bethsaida?
Well, we're not told, but it's apparent that they need to repent... and they're not doing it.

And when Jesus did miracles in their town they haven't been impressed.
What they saw didn't change their hearts.

Now we find Jesus taking a blind man out of Bethsaida to heal him and tells him NOT to go back into the village.

Remember my saying earlier that "If I want certain things to happen in my life then there are certain places I need to be, certain places I need to go? Well, by the same token – If I want certain things to happen in my life then there are certain places I DON'T want to be.

If this man was going to be healed by Jesus he needed to be taken OUT of Bethsaida.
And he needed to STAY OUT of Bethsaida.
Bethsaida was not a good place to be healed because it was not a place of faith.

If you want to grow in your faith there are certain places you shouldn't go.
If you want Jesus to do something powerful in your life there are places you shouldn't be.

Ordinarily you'd think that would be places like bars and wild parties.
But there are "nice" places you shouldn't be either.

- Places like certain bodies of higher learning.
Secular colleges and universities.

I've been to one of those and I saw first-hand the extreme efforts some professors made to destroy the faith of their Christian students. But why would they do that? Because these teachers viewed Christianity as a wall that stood against all they wanted to teach. As long as that wall stood they could not accomplish their ultimate indoctrination of the student.

- Another place that can be difficult for Christians is in their own families.
Certain families are filled with people who don't want to hear about Christ. Filled with people who do everything they can to insult and undermine your faith. They don't want to hear about Christ because it would make them feel guilty and sinful... and they would prefer not to be bothered.

- And sometimes that place you shouldn't be can even be a church.
I know of one congregation where 2 of the leading men in the church were adulterers. One of them owned a factory where he had propositioned practically all the women who worked there. The other church leader would go down to the bars, toss back a few beers and try to pick up some of the women there.
And EVERYBODY in town knew it.
And most of the people in the church knew it.
But they all chose to look the other way.

It's places like that that you don't want to be and it's people like that that you don't want to hang around with if you want Jesus doing anything of any impact in your life. AND YOU'VE got to be the one to decide whether those places and those people are dragging you down in your faith.

You see, that was the problem for the blind man in our story today.
He'd been in Bethsaida way too long.
And he'd been around the citizens of that town way too long
He'd allowed himself to be influenced by their lack of faith and their lack of morality. So in order to do anything in that man's life... Jesus had to get him out of Bethsaida and keep him out.

Let me repeat: If you want Jesus to do anything powerful in your life there are certain places and certain people you need to get away from.

The 2nd thing I noticed in this story of the blind man was how he grew in his faith.
Now personally, I don't think this man had any faith to begin with.
I don't think it was his idea to come to Jesus.
Mark 8:22 tells us that "some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him."

His friends brought him to Jesus
There's nothing in this story that says it was his idea.
I think he's only there because his friends brought him with them.
And I think that's part of the reason it took two times for Jesus to heal him.

Matthew 13:58 tells us "(Jesus) did not do many mighty works (in Nazareth), because of their unbelief."

You see, Jesus can't work in our lives if we do not have faith.
But over and over again in the Gospels Jesus tells people that it was their faith that healed them (Matthew 9:22; Mark 10:52; Luke 17:19).

Jesus could do things in people's lives IF they believed.
But if they didn't... Jesus couldn't do anything for them.
That's why Hebrews 11:6 tells us "...without faith it is impossible to please him"

But if I'm right, this man doesn't have any faith of his own.
If I'm right this man is there because his friends brought him.
He's not there because HE believes Jesus can heal him.

But then Jesus spits on his eyes and puts His hands on him... and asks: "What do you see?"
Jesus knows what the answer will be but he wants the man to put it into words.
And the man replies: "I see men, but they look like trees, walking."
He could see for the first time in years.
It was like a light bulb went on inside the man's heart.
And at that moment, I believe the man realized Jesus COULD heal him.
And once he realized that Jesus could do heal him THEN he had the faith for Jesus to heal him completely.

A preacher friend of mine called this "progressive faith."

In other words, the blind man PROGRESSED from no faith... to a little faith... and then, to the point where his faith in Jesus could change his life.

There are people who start out with a small amount of faith when they come to church. But the longer they're around Jesus the more their faith grows. That's one of the beauties of CHURCH.

It's a place where we can feed off of each other's faith. It's a place where (as Hebrews 10:24-25 says) we can "... stir up one another to love and good works" and "encourage one another."

In other words: Church is where we MUST be if we're going to grow up in our faith.

There are certain places and people you don't want to be around if you want get close to Jesus. But the one place you DO want to be... is a serious loving church. And the people you want to be around... are serious loving Christians.

II Corinthians 3:18 tells us we are being "...changed into the same image (the Glory of the Lord) from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord." (KJV)

In other words we progressively get more and more like the image of our God "glory to glory" as we allow God's Spirit to guide us in our faith.

ILLUS: When I first read that verse in the KJV I visualized a staircase (I went to the steps that led up to the stage). Everyone who starts out as Christians starts out on the "ground floor". The longer they're involved with fellowship and Bible study they begin mounting the steps one by one. In time they find they are several steps up the staircase and begin to realize there are people still on the first few steps. If they're wise they turn around and try to find ways to help those further down the staircase to come up to where they are.

Then they may happen to look further up the staircase to older saints who've progressed that far in their faith, and if they're wise they try to figure out how those folks got there so they themselves can ascend to that point.

ILLUS: During first service I was listening to the communion mediation when a thought occurred to me. We eat at God's table during communion. We feed on His presence in the loaf and in the cup. And we also feed on the songs that we sing, and allow the words of those songs to speak to us. And then we feed on the written word as we listen to the sermon.

We eat and we eat and we eat and we eat. But if that's all we do we're going to end up being fat Christians who just sit around and take up space. If we don't determine to "progress" up the staircase into God's image... if all we're content to do is stand around on the first few steps then we've missed the point of our salvation. God didn't save us to sit around and vegetate. He saved us so that we'd be driven to serve Him.

This kind of person is the one that doesn't wait to be asked. They see a need and they do it. If there's a need in the nursery, they want to serve there. If there's a need for a bus driver, they want to drive. If there's a mission trip they want to go, and so on and so on and so on.

Now, one last thing:

If I want to GROW in my faith I don't to be in a Bethsaida kind of place.
How many of you agree we should not be living in a Bethsaida kind of place?
(Many hands went up)
Good, that means I've done my job right.

But if that's true – that I shouldn't be living in a Bethsaida kind of place – there's one verse that puzzles me. Mark 8:22 tells us "And they came to Bethsaida..."
WHO came to Bethsaida? (Jesus and His disciples)

But we just got done saying you shouldn't be in Bethsaida.
We want to stay out of that place.
What on earth are Jesus and His men doing in this place that we shouldn't be?

Well (pause) why were Jesus and His men in Bethsaida?
That's right because that's where the sinners were. Jesus had come to that city because that's where the people were who needed what He had to offer.

You see, there are places I'm not going to find God.
And there are people who not encourage my faith IN God.
And I don't want to spend my time in those places and with those people.
Those are NOT the places I should be if I want God's wisdom and God's peace.

But those ARE the places I should be if I want to share God's wisdom and talk about God's peace.

ILLUS: You might say:
My family is totally ungodly.
They don't live like they should live and they don't talk like they should talk. If I spent much time with them they'd undermine my faith.
And I wouldn't doubt you.

Or you might say:
You don't know what it's like at work.
Those people drag me down.
They curse like sailors, they live brag about their sex lives. They are insulting and offensive.
It's hard for me to live as a Christian while I'm at work.
And I wouldn't doubt that either.

But we need to ask the question:
Where did Jesus spend His time?
With prostitutes and with sinners.
People who'd make your family and the fellow workers look like pikers.

When Jesus went to Bethsaida, He didn't go there for His own personal benefit.

- He didn't go there for the fine restaurants.
- And He didn't go for the great movie theatres.

- And He didn't go for the vast shopping malls.
Jesus did not go to Bethsaida for His own personal fulfillment.

Jesus went to Bethsaida because that's where He was called to serve.
These were the people who NEEDED His message of hope and salvation.

And when you go to family gatherings or when you go to work - you need to rethink why you go there.

You may have thought you were going to the family gatherings for the food & football games. But what you should really be doing is going there to show how a Christian acts and taking time to tell about your faith.

And you may have thought you were going to work for the paycheck.
No, no, no, no... You're a Christian.
Work is where you go for an opportunity to share your love for Jesus with people who can't get away from you for 8 hours or so.

I'm told that when Paul was arrested and taken to Rome, he was chained to two guards. And while that was happening Paul wrote the church at Philippi and said "I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ." (Philippians 1:12-13)

Paul didn't see himself as chained to two guards.
He saw the two guards being chained to HIM.
And since they couldn't leave HIM, he took opportunity to witness to them about Christ

Bethsaida is not a place we want to go to increase our faith.
Bethsaida is the place we should go to share our faith.

CLOSE: I read about a congregation where 2 men helped deliver food from the church pantry. They'd been asked by the niece of a particular woman to deliver food to her aunt. But when they arrived at their destination, they were shocked to discover that it was a business address: for a fortuneteller.
They double checked with their church, and found that indeed, that was the address. But the men were not happy about it. This was a fortuneteller after all. This woman was engaged in something that was directly condemned by God. But they went ahead went inside to take food to this woman who said she could talk to dead.
The woman was amazed "You guys really do help people regardless of a person's faith, don't you
"Yes," they said, "but life is very hopeless without Jesus."
They talked a little, more, put the food down, and got ready to leave.
But just before they left they prayed for the niece as the fortuneteller and customers watched. Seeing them pray for the niece some of the customers began to ask for prayers as well. And then the men then asked if any would like to become Christians and eight of those

present said, "yes."

These men went into Bethsaida. Not because it was a place they had come to gain wisdom or faith, but because it was a place to serve God. And because they were willing to go to their personal Bethsaida to serve their God, they made a difference in the lives of people who had no God.

Invitation: It may be that today you are living in Bethsaida. It may be that today you are without God. That's why offer a time of invitation for you to leave that place and receive God's gift of forgiveness and hope in your life...