

Good morning. It's a wonderful thing to be here with you today. Your Dean has reminded me this morning that we were together a year ago and when he said that it seemed impossible to, to really recall that we were together there in that magnificent Washington Cathedral in a prayer service of some, I think estimated, eight, nine thousand people, praying that our nation would not go to war. And it seems almost impossible that that was only a year ago. Rosetta Breeze, thank you, God bless you. What a marvelous voice. I can hardly stand to have her sing and not have this congregation say a loud and rousing "Amen." Let's try it. Little did she know that my conversion and my reason for being the General Secretary of the National Council is almost entirely owed to the black church and to my experiences there. So Rosetta, you couldn't have made me feel more at home. And how can we listen to that and not believe that in fact she loves Jesus with all her heart. It's magnificent. Our sermon this morning is based on the reading from Mark. It is the story of blind Bartimaeus. And Hans-Ruedi Weber of the World Council of Churches, who was a missionary in Asia, told me a long time ago that unless we can tell the bible stories without reading them from the Scripture, we really don't know them. We have to remember that, in fact, the Bible stories were handed down from person to person as oral tradition. And so if we really want to come to know those stories, we have to know them and feel them and understand them well enough that we can tell them and in telling them ourselves, we begin to contextualize them into our time and place. Can you not imagine in our time and place a blind Bartimaeus. Imagine Jesus walking along and, you know, well-known people always have people pulling at their coattails and they always have people trying to save them from those people that are pulling at their coattail. And in part the story is about Jesus understanding that he needed to talk to Bartimaeus and he needed to hear his story. And you can just see the disciples all saying to Bartimaeus, who probably was not the cleanest, certainly not the most dressed up of those walking along, shoving him aside and telling him that Jesus was really quite busy and had another engagement. And really, he should stop bothering him. And then the story goes on to tell us that Jesus, of course, does turn to Bartimaeus and he asks Bartimaeus what he wants. And Bartimaeus says to him in the Hebrew, "Rabbi" or teacher, "I want my sight." But it's interesting, he says, "I want to see again." And Jesus says to him, "Go, your faith has made you well." And so, it is not so much Jesus the healer but the faith of Bartimaeus himself. It is, I think, a very important story, a very powerful story. And perhaps it will help us with the present reality that we face here in this country. I come to you from New York City. I live in Manhattan, right in the city of New York where poverty and pain confront us on a daily basis and at our very doorstep. There may be many Bartimaeuses who walk along the streets of no more, of New York City. No more can you walk down Broadway even in the quote unquote "better parts of town," without having to wind your way through numerous homeless people. Increasingly they refuse to be ignored and desperation makes them all the more aggressive. Those of us who live in the city have, I'm afraid, learned to simply walk by, to tell ourselves that possibly theirs is just a hustle. And that, after all, giving them small amounts of money won't really help the situation. It's, after all, a matter of social policy. But as the number of homeless grow and the conditions of life clearly worsen, as jobs become harder and harder for college graduates to find and increasingly middle class white collar workers find themselves unemployed, we ask ourselves, "Where is justice" or worse, we close our eyes to the plight and ask no questions at all. There is a wonderful true story about Andrew Young, the

former mayor of Atlanta and a minister of the United Church of Christ. He became very distressed about the homeless problem in Atlanta. And when he was the mayor, he decided that he was going to dress in old clothes and live on the street for a few days to experience the problem, to see what he could learn firsthand. Well, you can imagine how that news was received at City Hall. The cynics discouraged him and told him that it was really one of his less bright ideas, that he would be recognized easily since he was on television practically nightly, and that the experiment would be totally useless, a waste of time. And the classic, of course, was beside that, they needed him at City Hall. The fact of the matter is that he did go into the streets. And much to his surprise and everyone else's, no one recognized him. Not because his disguise was so good but because, as he discovered, no one looks clearly into the face of the homeless. So he went unrecognized. The poor are faceless and nameless to most of us. You could say that we choose not to see and to the degree that we choose not to see the pain and the poverty and the suffering around us, we are as blind as Bartimaeus. The cry of Bartimaeus is "Teacher, rabbi, let me see again." And Jesus says to him, "Go forth, your faith has made you well." Think how often the parables of healing that refer to Jesus never credit Jesus himself with the healing. But almost always, Jesus credits the faith of the one who is healed with the cure. So Bartimaeus went forth that day not only able to see, not only freed from blindness, but much more importantly, gifted with the eyes of faith and that, my friends, is the point of the parable, for our life and our times. It says in Isaiah, justice is far from us and does not reach us. We wait for light but lo, there is only darkness. We are afflicted in our time with a kind of spiritual blindness, the kind of blindness that only faith will cure. But the eyes of faith do not see the world in the same way that others do. The eyes of faith see pain and problems and injustice. And the eyes of faith are unable to ignore that reality. Bartimaeus' wellness depended upon the depth of his faith. On first reading of the parable it might be easy to miss its deeper meaning. For we assume, of course, that anyone who is blind would prefer to be sighted. But when we begin to think more deeply we recognize that with the gift of sight, especially with the eyes of faith, comes responsibility and often, it is easier and less disruptive to remain in the world of darkness. Anyone who has ever been involved or had anyone they love be involved in any kind of therapy knows that precisely this is the root of good therapy, to remove the blindness. But anyone ever engaged in a kind of therapy knows very well that the removal of the blindness and the ability to function effectively requires a great deal of pain. So it is easier, often, and less disruptive to remain in a world of darkness. Not everyone wants to see. I have just returned from South Africa, that place where in these days pain and hope are mixed with equal portions. It is a world apart from ours and yet I think it is enough like ours to illumine our darkness. I want to tell you a true story out of the South African struggle. And it seemed important to me, because of who you are in this congregation, that I not tell you the story of Desmond Tutu or Allan Boesak or Frank Chikane or other of those blacks for whom the South African struggle is their very life. But I am going to tell you the story, a true story about a white man. A white man who could have avoided the struggle but in fact chose to be in the middle of it. The man's name is Beyers Naude. I am not surprised if you don't know his name because he has never been the one whose name has made the papers. But if you look at the negotiating sessions and if you know Beyers as I do, you will see sitting at the right hand of Nelson Mandela, one Beyers Nau de and when I tell you his story, you will know just how remarkable that is. Beyers Naude is now seventy four years old. He is a man with his eyes wide open to all that surrounds him. But it was not always that way. When Beyers was a young man, he was bright and articulate, a rising star in South African society and in the Dutch Reformed Church where he was ordained to the pastorate. He was, when he was very young, given a large and prestigious congregation in the suburbs of Johannesburg. And very soon he

was elected to a very special group of young men, yes, all men, called the Broederbond. They are the creme de la creme of South African society and of the Dutch Reformed Church. And as such, they were the architects and the defenders of the system of apartheid. Never forget, my friends, that apartheid was designed and defended by church leaders on matters of faith. It's chief proponent was the Dutch Reformed Church and Beyers Naude was slated by his colleagues to become a future state president of South Africa after he gained proper experience. But God had hold of Beyers and would not let him rest. He kept talking to the blacks that worked in his house, that worked near his church. That may not seem remarkable to you but forty years ago, that was not the pattern in South Africa. He wrestled with their plight and his conscience was gradually, like, dripping water on a stone being pricked. After the Sharpeville massacre where hundreds were killed, he could no longer rest easy and he asked to go into the Black areas. It's a small thing. But so like Beyers not just to go and interject himself but to ask permission to go. He wanted to see for himself the conditions of life for these children of Africa. You see, they were then and to some degree still are today virtually invisible. One can visit South Africa, clearly one of the most beautiful nations in this world, and one can come away never having encountered the areas in which the native people of South Africa live and work and have their being. But Beyers asked to go and see for himself. And once he saw, he knew for a certainty what he already knew in his heart, that what he saw was a travesty for human dignity and human freedom. And one could almost hear him say "Teacher, rabbi, let me see again." And his deep-seated faith removed the years of blindness and Beyers became one of the nation's most ardent and effective anti-apartheid activist. Yes, he paid heavily to be a sighted person. He was defrocked by his church, stripped literally of his robe and his clergy credentials. The day that he was asked to step down from his pulpit, he was literally asked by his congregation to remove his robe and to leave it on the pulpit chair. And without his robe that day he walked to the back of the church no longer recognized as a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church. He was ostracized by his friends, he was banned by his government. And if I had known that we were going to have such a fine soloist I would have asked her to work with me. Because nothing would have been more appropriate to sing here than that wonderful gospel song, "He touched me." Because what really happened to Beyers was he was touched in that special way by the hand of Jesus. And even as his worldly fortunes dwindled, his spirit soared, his faith had indeed made him strong and well and whole. And today he is a giant of a man, more than we will ever know except those of us who know him personally. History will never record the many times that he has interjected himself between Mandela and de Klerk because you see he's virtually bilingual, not only literally but figuratively. He has lived in both these worlds. He is one who says and speaks the truth in a place where most have preferred blindness. And for Beyers, the suffering is not over. He will never receive credit unless his children tell the story. His role will probably never be clearly known. He will never play a leadership role in the country that he has helped to free. In fact, the thought would never occur to him for he knows that his task is to prepare the way for native African leadership. Beyers has given much to South Africa and to the Church of Jesus Christ and I am proud to say to the ecumenical movement. He is one of the finest of the ecumenical leaders in the world today. He followed Desmond Tutu as director of the South African Council of Churches, mind you, he came out of retirement to take that difficult job when Desmond was elected a bishop. And he said then that he would only stay there until black leadership was identified and that's precisely what he did. But he was there at a very crucial time. And he has also suffered and been crucified. Make no mistake about it. To be given the eyes of faith is always and forever a disruptive experience. To be given the eyes of faith is always and forever a disruptive experience. After leaving the Dutch Reformed Church, Beyers spent most of his life in the ecumenical

movement for there he found a home, there he found kindred souls who were also able to see what the rest of the world chose to ignore. That, I think, my friends, is both a gift and the challenge of the ecumenical movement. The ecumenical movement connects us with people who are very different from us and it is their that sharpens our vision and gives us a new way of seeing the reality around us. One of our most severe blind spots today is our inability to see that God intends for us to be one people, that God intends that we behave as family with those who share this planet with us. At least a part of the present difficulties faced by the ecumenical movement is rooted in the spiritual blindness that afflicts us as a nation. Any institution that continues to ask us to be with people who make us uncomfortable, with people who are not like us, with people who challenge our basic beliefs, any institution that asks us to see our racism, our sexism, our homophobia, our coldness toward the poor and the unlovely, toward the homeless, any institution that asks that of us can never expect to be popular. Yet, at their finest, ecumenical bodies are pressing us to the kind of faith that will open our eyes and our hearts, to a world of need around us. This is the necessary first step to solving the problems of violence and poverty and despair that plague us as a nation. The most confrontive message of today's parable is the awesome truth that Jesus expects us to be partners in our own salvation. The parable tells us that it is our faith that will make us well, that will heal our spiritual sickness. You heard her sing this morning, "God is real. I can feel God deep in my soul." It is that kind of faith that is needed to help us beyond our spiritual blindness. It is a radical idea to believe that the healing of the nations may just depend on the faith of those persons who have the eyes of faith. And yet, it may just be true but let us always be mindful of the reality that the eyes of faith see no boundaries, no special class of people, no color, no nationality and even more so, no faith more right than another. But our faith is based on love and it is our understanding that we are one people. For Christian people, it is the eucharist, it is the communion that calls us regularly to this understanding. It is at the table of the Lord that we remember that Jesus suffered and died for all humanity. The gospel song says, "the debt of love is ours." There we remember and are called to familial relationships. We are, you see, related to our sisters and brothers in this world by blood. It is not a casual relationship. We are related by the blood of Jesus and redeemed by his passion and his suffering. Communion may be a very personal moment but my friends it is never, never a privatistic event. It is instead a covenant to be community with all of God's creation. In the Middle East there is a cultural tradition that instructs us in the meaning of this meal. Now in the sophisticated times of today, I don't suppose that it is fully carried out. Yet there are still parts of the Middle East where this tradition holds true. You had better not accept an invitation to dinner in the Middle East easily. We're learning more and more about the Middle East these days as we watch carefully the peace process. And we come to know that the Middle East is a place where symbols and gestures have enormous meaning. Sometimes we say you must understand the smoke and mirrors if you are to understand what's going on in the Middle East. If you are invited to a person's home in the Middle East and you are invited to share a meal with them, you are, then, considered to be part of that family. And in some measure that is still true in Jewish tradition even outside of the Middle East. Not only are you invited, but you are expected then to call on that family forever, for anything that you might want - money, health, anything you might need. And remember, it was in this land, with this tradition, that the Jewish Jesus invited his disciples to supper. And it is in that same spirit that God invites all of God's children to that table, all over the world, week after week, year after year, age after age. And the people of God come to that table with familial privileges hosted by a God who showed his love for us on the cross and who expects that we will love one another. God's love for us is not now nor has it ever been platonic. We dare not offer less to our neighbors. Rabbi, teacher, Help me to see again. Forgetting

about. Forgetting about.