

<sup>46</sup> And they came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside.<sup>47</sup> And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"<sup>48</sup> And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"<sup>49</sup> And Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart. Get up; he is calling you."<sup>50</sup> And throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.<sup>51</sup> And Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" And the blind man said to him, "Rabbi, let me recover my sight."<sup>52</sup> And Jesus said to him, "Go your way; your faith has made you well." And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him on the way.

Jeremy was a captive, tied up and held behind a locked door. He had no idea where he was; he surely did not know how this all happened, and he certainly did not know how it was going to turn out. He kept hoping that there would be some dramatic rescue, like in the movies, or the hour-long television shows. But time was slipping by, and he knew that this was reality – not a movie or television.

Something was going to happen; he could feel it in his bones. Then he heard a noise and realized that there was a key turning in the lock in the door. He found his way over to the door and dropped down to his knees. He tried to look through the keyhole. But it was blocked. Then as he continued to watch, the blockage – he realized was the key – was being removed. Before him now, as he peered through the keyhole, he could see an open field. No one was in sight.

Was this the rescue he had been waiting for? Could he open the unlocked door and run away to freedom

through the open field. Or was this a trap? And as soon as he opened the door, would the ax would fall upon his head? It was hard to think that there was something good out there, based on the fact that he was behind a solid door and only looking through a keyhole.

What could he do? He knew that the next move was up to him ... open the door and escape? ... open the door and meet his death? ... sit and wait for someone else to make the decision?

Life is a lot like this. We aren't able – any of us – to see life fully and completely. **We all look through keyholes** –

- **keyholes** of expectations that shape what we see;
- **keyholes** based on what we have lived;
- **keyholes** of what we have been told;
- **keyholes** of what we have been promised-- whether or not those promises have proved true;
- **keyholes** of what we believe.
- **keyholes** that ALWAYS prevent us from seeing all the options

What's **YOUR** keyhole?

To take no action is to make a decision, indeed.

What's **YOUR** keyhole?

Bartimaeus was on the side of the road leading into and out of Jericho. The word “Bar” in Hebrew meant “son of” so for the scripture to say that Bartimaeus was the “son of Timaeus” tells us nothing – EXCEPT to tell us that he had no known worth, no known value, no known name of his own, only that as son of Timaeus. He was blind, which in that culture meant “worthless” or “guilty of something” according to some people’s view of life then ... and even today, unfortunately.

Bartimaeus was on the side of the road leading into and out of Jericho, looking through a keyhole. The keyhole of a blind man. What’s that look like?

But he had heard about this Jesus. And something about what he had heard caused him to cry out, even though it would subject him to ridicule, censure, and put down: “Jesus Christ, Son of David, have mercy on me.”

Passing over much commentary that could be made about all of this episode, I jump right into Jesus’ response: **“What do you want me to do for you?”**

Have you ever called out to Jesus in the midst of hurting, hoping that He would answer you like that? **“What do you want me to do for you?”**

Like Ralphie finally getting up to Santa Claus’s lap in the movie, “Christmas Story,” we hope that we will not blow it. Hope that we will not choke. Hope that we will get it right, when the Eternal Word, the One Whose very Word speaks Creation into existence says to us: **“What do you want me to do for you?”**

Bartimaeus’ response will have much to do with the keyhole through which he had been seeing life.

- Will he be cautious and ask for enough bread to get him through a week of begging along the roadside.
- Surely, he cannot hope for something greater – like the restoration of his sight. No, surely, his keyhole would not allow something so grand.

***But IT IS HERE where the lesson of this week comes in.***

Bartimaeus’ request will indeed depend on the keyhole through which he sees life (seeing, ironically, as a blind

man). **And that keyhole will largely depend on ONE FACTOR. And that factor is called HOPE.**

In the last two verses of 1 Corinthians, chapter 13 (often called “the LOVE chapter”) Paul concludes:

**For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.**

And so we have called it “the LOVE chapter” and promptly forgotten **faith**, and even more so: **HOPE**.

- **HOPE** –or more accurately called **ABSENCE OF HOPE** -- it is what is behind the drug problem that the President came to discuss in Charleston, West Virginia this past week,.But did you hear the President lift this up as a cause.

- **HOPE** –or more accurately called **ABSENCE OF HOPE** – it is what is behind the drug problem that even Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball did not specifically lift up in her Charleston Gazette-Daily Mail op-ed piece, as the cause behind the drug problem.

- **HOPE** –or more accurately called **ABSENCE OF HOPE** – is a keyhole that closes off options, shuts down responses, and leaves people desperate for any antidote to numb the pain that is unique to **LACK OF HOPE**, and which even OxyContin and Heroin will numb, but not cure.

- **HOPE** –or more accurately called **ABSENCE OF HOPE** – the reason given me by parents of 26 Protestant and Catholic children who had taken their own lives in a six months period in Belfast, parents who had gathered to put aside their differences to plant a tree that they dreamed might be a sign of HOPE for other parents' children.

- **HOPE** –or more accurately called **ABSENCE OF HOPE** -- is a blight that is known by, but is so paralyzing that most of its victims cannot even understand, let alone, speak its name.

**“What do you want me to do for you?”** Jesus asks Blind Bartimaeus.

And this is where we see **EXTRAORDINARILY HIGH DRAMA** played out in the Gospel.

**“Rabbi, let me recover my sight,”** Bartimaeus says. His LACK OF HOPE keyhole does not prevent him from seeing the power that stands before him.

**“Rabbi, let me recover my sight,”** Bartimaeus says. Somehow his KEYHOLE does not prevent him from realizing that THE HOPE OF THE WORLD IS STANDING RIGHT THERE IN FRONT OF HIM. This blind man can see what the supposedly “fully sighted” religions leaders are unable to see.

And Jesus UPS THE ANTE IN THIS ALREADY SPINE-TINGLING DRAMA. Jesus says: **“Go YOUR way. Your faith has made you well.”**

**“Go YOUR way,”** Jesus says: And **WE** might just not recognize how the drama concludes, because we are so used to be calling “Christians,” that we don’t catch the subtlety of what follows.

Let me spell it out. Read from the 5th Gospel of the New Testament, “The Acts of the Apostles” – chapter 9, the first two verses. It’s about the apostle Paul, back before his

conversion, when he was called Saul, and he was a Jewish Pharisee persecuting the Christian Church:

<sup>1</sup> But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to THE WAY, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

“THE WAY” is what the early Christian Church was called. Jesus said to Bartimaeus: **“Go YOUR way. Your faith has made you well.”** And we are told that ***IMMEDIATELY [BARTIMAEUS] RECOVERED HIS SIGHT AND FOLLOWED JESUS ON “THE WAY”***

Not, as Jesus allowed: “your way” but rather “THE WAY”

The difference is THE KEYHOLE through which Bartimaeus saw life.

**His keyhole was not one** (pardon the double negative) **of NO HOPE.**

This week I attended the United Methodist Women Annual Conference Annual Meeting in Lewisburg, and I heard a “mission moment” given by Belinda Toms, the



Executive Director of Tyrand Parish, one of our seven conference supported mission centers.

She told us the story of taking *Response Magazine* writer Richard Lord to visit a home where mother had blown out her nose on drugs and now talks like Minnie Mouse, but an octave higher. The woman, [I will call Elaine] is now out of jail & drug-free for two years. She frequently gives talks in her comic sounding voice and explains how the reason is not at all funny – and she warns her audiences how this is what can happen when snort drugs...

As they left “Elaine’s: house, the writer asked Belinda Toms, "When is a family hopeless?" She responded, "Never! As long as there is breath there is hope."

And I’m glad that this is the attitude of those front line workers – There is ALWAYS hope, so long as there is breath.

**But THAT is NOT always the attitude of the ones who have LOST HOPE. For them, not only is there NOT always hope; there is NEVER hope.**

Bartimaeus, and luckily “Elaine,” came to know the HOPE that comes by FOLLOWING **THE WAY**. But too many people are not looking through that keyhole.

I have reprinted an article<sup>i</sup> – there are several copies on the Annie Campbell Welcome Center, in the Narthex, that we discussed a few months ago in the bi-monthly Upper Room devotion and discussion group. It's about the ***"Death and Resurrection of an Urban Church."*** I hope that after this sermon, some of you pick up a copy and read it.

Here's the essence: ***There was this caring, compassionate urban church that did all kinds of nice, kind things for the homeless and economically disadvantaged people in their neighborhood. But somewhere along the way they got the notion that all of their ministries did one thing – even though their intention was compassionate – and the one thing that it did was to make sure that the homeless and economically disadvantaged people in their neighborhood saw themselves through the keyhole of being loved by the church but HOPELESSLY homeless and economically disadvantaged.***

The HANDOUT ministries of that Church gave out lots of love, but not much HOPE at all.

Then the Church decided to quite GIVING AWAY handouts and began to give the same folks a way to DISCOVER and to SHARE THEIR OWN GIFTS.

They quit making the homeless and economically disadvantaged feeling *merely loved* and began to **GIVE THEM HOPE.**

In his book “Give and Take” the youngest and most popular professor at the Wharton School of Business, Adam Grant tells how nearly every single human can benefit from discovering the JOY OF GIVING. He writes about how this is part of how the humans are hardwired.

When we FIX people in the role of RECEIVING, we may show them love, but we don’t blow apart their **HOPELESSNESS KEYHOLES** of seeing life.

Jesus gave Bartimaeus a chance. **“What do you want me to do for you?”** And blind Bartimaeus, who was able to see what the religious folks could not, stepped up answer the call, and decided to do what God had created him to do, and he decided to not be a **MERE RECEIVER**, but to **FOLLOW JESUS ON “THE WAY”**

What's YOUR keyhole?

What gift do you have that is crying out to be shared?

Are you willing to empower folks, with HOPE, or do you prefer the easier task of merely keep them in their place?

**Tough questions, I know. But Jesus had a way of doing that, don't you know.**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

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<sup>i i</sup> For an idea of how Broadway United Methodist Church is turning the model of the urban church inside out, look for a moment at its food pantry, clothing ministry and after-school program. They've been killed off.

In many cases, they were buried with honors. But those ministries, staples of the urban church, are all gone from Broadway. Kaput.

Broadway's summer youth program, which at one point served 250 children a day — bringing them in for Girl Scouts and basketball, away from the violence and drugs of Broadway's neighborhood — is gone, too. Broadway let the air out of the basketballs. Sent the Girl Scouts packing.

Then peek into the comfortably cluttered office of the Rev. Mike Mather, who is prone to putting his feet on his desk and leaning so far back in his swivel chair that you expect him to go flying at any moment.

Watch him, inverted like this, until he suddenly gets animated, drops his feet to the floor, leans over, elbows on knees, and shares this: "One of the things we literally say around here is, 'Stop helping people.'

"I'm serious."

He *is* serious. Mather has given years of thought to this, and he's as sure about it as anything he learned in seminary.

Broadway UMC's leaders have changed the way they view their neighbors — as people with gifts, not just needs. In what ways does this view reframe the conversation? What difference does reframing the relationship make in the outcomes achieved?

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“The church, and me in particular,” Mather said, “has done a lot of work where we have treated the people around us as if, at worst, they are a different species and, at best, as if they are people to be pitied and helped by us.”

With that in mind, [Broadway](#) has — for more than a decade now — been reorienting itself. Rather than a bestower of blessings, the church is aiming to be something more humble.

**“The church decided its call was to be good neighbors. And that we should listen and see people as children of God,”** said De’Amon Harges, a church member who sees Broadway’s transformation in terms not unlike Christ’s death, burial and resurrection.

### **Rejecting charity**

In 2004, Mather **hired** Harges to be Broadway’s **first “roving listener,”** a position that is exactly what it sounds like. Harges’ job was to rove the neighborhood, block by block at first, spending time with the neighbors, not to gauge their needs but to understand what talents lay there.

“I was curious about what was good in people, and that was what I was going to find out,” he said.

Harges wound up spending hours sitting on people’s porches and hovering near them as they worked in their backyard gardens. He began listening for hints about their gifts.

**“I started paying attention” he said, “to what they really cared about.”**

Mather, meanwhile, was drawing deeply from the philosophical well of **“asset-based community development”** — the notion of capitalizing on what’s good and working in a place rather than merely addressing its deficiencies.

[John McKnight](#), a professor emeritus at Northwestern University, is one of the founders of the approach. He literally wrote the book on building communities from the inside out. He describes Mather and Harges as a “God-given team.”

When Broadway invited him to come speak, McKnight spent some time walking the church’s neighborhood with Harges.

**“What he’s listening for is their gifts — ‘What has God given you?’”** McKnight said. He doesn’t advocate ignoring people’s needs and problems, but rather to look first for solutions within the community itself. Later, he said, institutions and services can help.

**“John 15:15 tells us that, at the Last Supper, Jesus said to the disciples, ‘I no longer call you servants. ... I call you friends.’** So the final way of defining what Christianity is based on is friendship, not service. ... I think Mike and De’Amon are guided by that spiritual principle.”

A key to what’s going on now at Broadway, McKnight says, is the church’s brutally honest view of charity, which McKnight defines as “a one-way compensatory activity that never changes anything.”

### **Seeing and serving needs**

Like so many older, urban churches, Broadway came to its charitable ways honestly, and with the best of intentions.

When the current building was erected, in 1927, the church along the banks of Fall Creek was on the northern outskirts of Indianapolis. It was then a flourishing area primed for growth.

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Within a decade, Broadway had 2,300 members. The pews were packed. The Sunday school rooms were buzzing.

But by the late 1950s, Indianapolis began to experience white flight to newer suburbs. The neighborhood began a long, slow decline. And so did the church.

By the mid-1990s, weekly attendance was down to 75. The pews were empty. The Sunday school was dark.

Amid the surrounding decay, the church assumed a new role: caregiver.

Broadway, Mather says now, came to see its neighborhood for all of its problems — poverty and abandoned houses, drugs and the related violence, high teen pregnancy and dropout rates.

Mather confesses to being part of that history. He has been pastor of Broadway twice, and during his first stint, from 1986 to 1991, he retooled the church's summer youth program — the one with the basketballs and the Girl Scouts — and injected it with a new spiritual theme each week. And it took off.

"We felt so good about it," Mather said, "that I broke my arm patting myself on the back."

But then Mather was confronted with a heavy dose of reality. In a nine-month span, nine young men within a four-block radius of the church died violent deaths. Some of them had come through that great youth program at Broadway, a program that had done nothing to inoculate them against street violence.

Mather was left to bury them — along with the sense that what Broadway had been doing for its neighborhood all those years had been effective.

#### **Asking new questions**

Mather carried that sense with him to another United Methodist church in South Bend, Indiana, where he was assigned in 1992.

Again, he was a pastor in an urban setting. But this time Mather began to probe more deeply into McKnight's philosophies, into what it meant to be an urban preacher. Finally, he asked himself whether he was living out what he believed, and what he had been preaching.

One **Pentecost Sunday**, Mather preached about Peter's sermon in Acts 2 regarding the prophecy of Joel:

*"And in the last days it will be," God says, "that I will pour out my Spirit on all people, and your sons and your daughters will prophesy, and your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy." (Acts 2:17-18 NET)*

At a congregational meal after the service, a **parishioner asked Mather pointedly, "So how come we don't treat people like that?"**

Mather didn't understand. Then the **woman explained that she was talking about the government food giveaway hosted by the church. To get food, participants had to fill out a form that basically asked, "How poor are you?"**

**Nowhere on the form were there questions about people's gifts.**

**"If we believe that God's spirit is flowing down on all people, old and young, women and men — and on the poor," the woman continued, "why don't we treat people like that's true?"**

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Mather saw where she was going. He put aside the government form and, in a number of ways, began asking people new questions. One of his favorites: “What three things do you do well enough that you could teach others how to do it?”

Soon, the church was tapping into people who could repair cars, make quilts, paint, and cook some of the best Mexican food Mather had ever eaten. Through that, some neighbors found new livelihoods. More found a community.

By the time the church reassigned him back to Broadway in 2003, Mather was fully committed to **this inside-out approach**.

He hired Harges as the roving listener, then started closing ministries from the charity era. The moves were as practical as they were oriented to the new philosophy.

For 30 years, Broadway had tutored neighborhood kids after school. And for 30 years, the neighborhood dropout rate kept climbing higher. So Broadway stopped tutoring.

**For decades, the church had been feeding people out of its pantry. But local health officials were telling Mather that the No. 1 health problem facing the neighborhood wasn't starvation.**

**It was obesity — often leading to diabetes.**

**To Mather, it made no sense to hand out carbs in a box and peaches in cans of heavy syrup to people who were overweight.**

“We're not only not helping,” he concluded. “We're actively making people sicker.”

Instead of handing out food, Mather hopes to help people find long-lasting solutions to problems such as hunger. He likes to tell [the story of Adele](#), who came to the food pantry for supplies for her family and ended up, a year and a half later, using her gifts as a cook to open her own restaurant.

But giving up old ways is difficult. Mather tried to ease the shock to Broadway's system. He devoted part of one Sunday service to bidding farewell to the dead ministries. That included the thrift shop, which by then was being run by women in their 80s and 90s.

During the service, Mather asked everyone who had ever worked in the thrift shop or had ever donated to it to stand. Many did. Then, in unison, the congregation said, “Well done, good and faithful servants.”

### **Convincing the doubters**

Not everyone cared for Broadway's new approach.

Neighbors were grumbling about services the church had cast aside. There were even doubters among the Broadway staff. Among them was Cathy Pilarski.

Before moving to Indianapolis in 2008, Pilarski had run a mobile latte business in Tucson, Arizona. She needed work in Indy and found it at Broadway — as a janitor. Six months in, Mather wanted to promote her to facilities manager.

Pilarski knew nothing about mechanics or wiring or other building systems. Besides, her head was spinning from everything going on at Broadway.

She responded to Mather's offer with disdain.

**“No, Mike,” she told the pastor. “No, because I think you're crazy, and I think there are some other people who think you are crazy, too.”**

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As soon as she spoke the words, Pilarski regretted them. She had always fancied herself as someone who liked to think outside the box. Here was a pastor taking a chainsaw to the box. And she was resisting. That revelation told her that maybe she should trust Mather and his vision.

When she did, Pilarski came to see that Mather was less interested in her cleaning skills and her knowledge of building mechanics than in her social skills and her experience as an entrepreneur. More than the building itself, he was concerned about building community.

Such rewiring was going on across the church.

**The church's governing council stopped rehashing committee reports at its quarterly meetings and instead began inviting people from the neighborhood and the congregation to come in and tell them about the work they'd been up to.**

Harges began connecting people with common interests. Within four blocks of the church — the same area where young people had been dying years before — Harges found 45 backyard gardeners. He brought them together around a meal. With no agenda.

The gardeners liked it enough that they began to meet monthly. None of them individually had seen their green thumbs as a gift. Together, they began to realize that they had something valuable. In a neighborhood that's part of an urban food desert, they've begun planning their own farmer's market.

Broadway is even passing on the art of listening to young people.

**In each of the last six years, the church has hired 15 to 20 kids from the neighborhood to learn from Harges and then head out into the neighborhood as part-time roving listeners.**

The information they've been bringing back has enabled other interest groups to form in areas such as art, poetry, music, law and education.

From these gatherings, people have found jobs, collaborators and friends. There are still hungry people who need a meal. They just find it now among friends.

"The whole idea is that we extend beyond the physical structure of our church and that we grow community — and that we know community — in real ways," said Seana Murphy, who lives near the church.

Recently, she invited people from the church and the neighborhood with an interest in education for conversation over meatloaf and mashed potatoes.

The people around her table included a woman who grew up in a housing project who's now attending a community college, a dropout who got a high school equivalency diploma and plans to be a nurse, a college administrator, and an assistant pastor with a Ph.D.

At the meal, one woman mentioned she had struggled with depression. Now, Murphy said, others will know to check on her from time to time.

### **Making connections**

Tamara Leech, an associate professor at the Indiana University Fairbanks School of Public Health, has been studying what Broadway is doing for the past six years.

Social cohesion, Leech said, is a key to improving life in what she calls "neighborhoods of the concentrated disadvantaged."



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“The neighbors see Broadway as a place where you can go and ask for help. Not for goods or services,” she said. “You go there for connections.”

Leech hopes to win a grant to do a long-term study of Broadway and its neighborhood. But, for now, hard data is scarce. At least from a theoretical basis, Leech said, “What I do know is that Broadway takes an approach that makes the most sense to me.”

Anecdotally, both she and Mather have heard about people finding jobs through their Broadway community connections. Others have found the encouragement to enter college or technical programs. Leech points to a partnership with the state health department in which the church brought together teen mothers, many intent on having more babies right away, with older women. Two years later, none of the girls has had another child.

Mather says the neighborhood is much less violent than in the 1990s, but he concedes the causes of that are hard to isolate. For one thing, some homes that were once abandoned or occupied by the poor are now being inhabited by middle class families.

Change also is evident in what’s going on in Sunday school classrooms that sat dark for decades.

Today, they are filled with an unusual collection of small businesses that rent space, together with fledgling organizations that get space for free. Meeting in the church now is a metropolitan youth orchestra and an eclectic mix of artists and, on Sunday nights, 50 or more gamers.

There’s a dance studio and a pottery shop and an office for a small architectural firm. The church acquired a commercial kitchen license, and now people from the neighborhood use it for catering startups.

Pilarski, the onetime doubter, is in charge of managing all this. She still thinks her pastor is crazy. “Certifiable,” she said, joking.

But in each busy corner of the church, in each of the hundreds of faces that now pass under its roof each week, she sees something that was missing for a long time — the majesty of God.

“I want to make sure that God is glorified not only in that sanctuary but in every corner of this building,” she said.

**Some of that bustle has spilled over into the sanctuary. Sunday morning attendance has climbed past 200. But in the Broadway economy, that’s almost an afterthought.**

**Broadway has died to its old self, giving up the things that were holding it back, said Harges, the roving listener. The church’s resurrection has come from seeking the gifts of others.**

**“Our role in this place is to become like yeast — that invisible agent for social change. It is not about us as an agency inviting people to witness God here. Instead, what we want to do is to see God out of this place.”**

### Questions to consider

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- Whom do you serve? With whom do you partner? What difference does framing the relationship make in the outcomes achieved?
  - The Rev. Mike Mather asks people, “What three things do you do well enough that you could teach others how to do it?” How does a question like that shift the conversation?
  - Is anyone assigned to listen to your congregation and community? If so, do those listeners compare notes and connect what they are learning?
  - Mather realized that his church's food pantry might be contributing to obesity and diabetes. Do your ministries produce unintended consequences? How do you envision the impact of your projects? How do you assess their impact?