

**Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704**

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## **A Call to Stewardship**

Mark 10:49

One of the most interesting personalities among the charter members of this church was a man named John Francis Rague who may have been the architect for our 1839 building. Rague moved from New York City to Springfield in 1831 and became a member of First Presbyterian Church. He quickly assumed the role of the first choir director at First Presbyterian. In 1835 he was one of the thirty members of that church who withdrew to form Second Presbyterian and then served as the first choir director of this church. Rague was a man of many talents. In addition to being a musician he was a baker, an architect, and a builder. His credentials as an architect were established through his association in New York City with one of the leaders of the new Greek Revival architectural movement in America. Thanks to our own Wally Henderson we can enjoy the work of John Rague today because he was the architect of the Old State Capitol. Rague later designed the state houses of Iowa and Wisconsin.

Rague's success was a product of his talent to be sure. But his career was also advanced by his position as a consummate "insider." He was elected a town trustee in 1836. He was a trustee of several early schools in Springfield. He was president of the Illinois State Music Society. He was one of the original directors of the Illinois Mutual Fire Insurance Corporation. Everybody wanted him on their team. One source claims that Rague secured the contract for the statehouse through the influence of his "political and church friends."<sup>1</sup>

Rague learned early on the importance of having highly placed friends and associates. Rague's father came to America from France during the Revolutionary War as the personal surgeon of the Marquis de Lafayette. When the General returned to France after the War, the Rague family stayed in America. When Lafayette made his triumphal return visit to this country in 1824 Rague's father was deceased. At a lavish dinner to honor the General in New York City, which was attended by all the movers and shakers of the city, the 25 year old son of Lafayette's old surgeon was seated at his side.<sup>2</sup> When Rague moved to Springfield six years later he brought that celebrity cachet with him. But over time celebrity wears thin. When he left Springfield 12 years later he did so under a cloud of business and sexual misconduct.

The natural desire to be an insider is explored in the tenth chapter of the Gospel of Mark. There Jesus is approached by the disciples James and John. They come asking for a favor. When Jesus asks them what they want they say, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand, and one at your left, in your glory (Mark 10:37)." They are seeking the positions closest to Jesus so they can further their own careers. The anger of the other disciples when they hear what James and John have done makes clear that they, too, are coveting these positions of special privilege. This is a moment which reveals that the disciples do not yet "get it." Being close to Jesus is not about serving ourselves. It is about serving others. It is about serving at great personal cost.

Mark wants his readers to understand that being an insider means nothing to Jesus. Immediately following this incident Mark describes an encounter that Jesus has with a man who is

clearly an "outsider." The blind beggar, Bartimaeus, is sitting outside the gate of the city of Jericho. It was of course a good place for a beggar to do business. People who come to sell their crops or other goods would be leaving with their wallets bulging. Many could well afford a coin or two for a beggar. But doing business outside the city gate also reinforces Bartimaeus' status as an outsider.

When Bartimaeus hears that Jesus is passing by he seizes the moment hoping that his life can be transformed. Since he does not have access to important people his only chance is to cry out, hoping to make himself heard above the noise and clamor of the streets. Many of those present are irritated by his ill-mannered shouting. He is forcefully told to be silent. But Bartimaeus does not give up. His cries for help continue.

Jesus hears his cries. He asks the outsider Bartimaeus the same question that he posed earlier to the insiders James and John. "What do you want me to do for you (Mark 10:51)?" But unlike James and John, Bartimaeus does not speak of moving up the career ladder. He knows exactly what he needs. He says, "Teacher let me see again (Mark 10:52)." Immediately, Bartimaeus receives the gift of sight. But this is just the beginning of his transformation. For Bartimaeus does not seek this gift to pursue his own agenda. He receives the gift of healing as a call to stewardship. Bartimaeus responds to that call and follows Jesus on the way. It is the outsider who shows us what it means to be a faithful disciple.

In 1885 this church celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The pastor, D. S. Johnson, delivered a very long sermon which recounted the history of the congregation. He spoke of the impact of the Civil War on the congregation. There were many still living who remembered those difficult years. He listed the names of thirteen members who served in the Union Army. Nine came home when the war ended and four died serving their country. But the most compelling act of service for Johnson was made by a soldier from this church whose name had been forgotten. He was a regular attender who never joined and his name was not entered on the church roll. He was an outsider who loved this church. Twenty years later many people remembered his story but no one remembered his name. Johnson described him in these words:

One of this congregation, an obscure man, the absence of whose name renders him none the less a hero, determined to give his life, if need be, for his Country. He packed his clothing in his wooden chest, wrote a will giving his little savings to the treasury of this church, and then enlisted and marched away. He was killed in battle, or died in hospital, no one can tell. But God knows his name.<sup>3</sup>

His last name was later discovered to be Frisbie and we have listed it on our military service plaque in the East Narthex. His is the only listing without a first name. But that's okay because God knows his name.

D. S. Johnson understood that this outsider had much to teach all the insiders who sat before him in the pews that day. We are not here to serve ourselves. We are here to respond to a call to stewardship. The words spoken to Bartimaeus are also directed to us. "Take heart, get up, Jesus is calling you (Mark 10:49)."

## Endnotes

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1. Richard E. Hart, *Lincoln's Springfield*, "Greek Revival Architecture," page 18.

2. Floyd S. Barringer, "Faith of Our Founders: A Walk Through Oak Ridge Cemetery," pages 33-34.
3. Address of D. S. Johnson, *Second Presbyterian Church Historical Data*, Vol. I, C. L. Conkling, pages 184-185.