Before I start, let me get my prop. Now you might be wondering what I have this onion for, but you'll soon see. As most of you know, John and I were at a wedding in Charlotte last weekend. John’s nephew got married, and it was a very special time. The Mincieli clan is spread throughout the country, so we don’t see each other very often. But several family members made it a point to come to the wedding, and it was great to be able to spend time with loved ones we hadn’t seen in a few years. Our daughter, Lisa and her husband Will, and our two grandkids, Cora and Ollie came, and so did our son, Matthew, and his girlfriend, Kerry. Now since Matthew isn’t here this morning, I can share with you that John and I hope someday soon, it will be their wedding we’ll be attending. Kerry is a special girl, and we’ve all enjoyed getting to know each other, as we sit around the dining room table telling stories, sharing thoughts, learning a little bit more about each other. And I think Kerry especially likes these conversations because quite frequently John or I will say something about Matthew that she didn’t know. Something about his childhood or past or something he did that, for whatever reason, Matthew conveniently forgot to tell her. This happens often enough that we now have a name for it. We call it, “peeling back the onion.” You know how you take an onion and peel back the layers, beginning with the outside one that’s the dirtiest and exposing the next layer. Which again sometimes is dirty or bruised. And as you peel away the layers, exposing the onion, sometimes the onion smells. And sometimes it brings tears to your eyes. But you keep peeling back layer after layer, until the good meat of the onion is finally exposed. Yes, “peeling back the onion” exposes the good, the bad and the ugly. And so when we throw off a new layer from the onion of Matthew’s life, he laughs and says he feels like we’re exposing him.

Which takes me to today’s scripture. I'll explain. Jesus and his disciples come to Jericho. Now at first glance, this sounds like something exciting. Jericho is considered to be the world’s oldest city. So imagine the history and tradition and character of the city. Kind of like those ante-bellum cities of the old South, like Savannah, Charleston, Richmond. Jericho is located seventeen miles outside Jerusalem in a lush, beautiful area with stately sycamore trees and such exquisite palm trees that it was nicknamed the “City of Palms.” It was on a trade route with lots of commerce, which made it a city of wealth and glamour. In fact King Herod the Great made it his winter residence. As you can imagine, Jericho was a happening spot. So what better place for Jesus to go and share his good news. However, according
to Mark, no sooner does Jesus get to Jericho, but he leaves Jericho. Why? The Bible doesn’t tell us, but my guess is that Jesus never intended to stay in Jericho. You see, he had been there before and I think he knew that people felt a little too comfortable there in Jericho. He knew that they worshipped the gods who called them to enjoy a relatively easy, convenient lifestyle with money, status, possessions, leisure, appearance. And Jesus knew that the God who instead called for sacrifice, compassion, forgiveness, service, generosity, would not be well received. People haven’t changed much over the past two thousand years, have they? Yes, today many people like the idea of a God who loves us and cares for us. But when this God comes in and challenges us to forgive someone who has wronged us – and not just once, but more than seventy times seven, who calls us to love our enemy who has threatened us or opposes us, to give to anyone who asks something from us without expecting anything in return, to not take revenge but instead turn the other cheek, to beware of the consequences when we are even angry with someone, well then….this God…we want to crucify him. And so Jesus leaves Jericho. But interestingly, as he leaves, a large crowd follows him. Which tells me there will always be some people everywhere who are counter cultural, and want what Jesus has to offer. Who want to leave their old ways behind and follow Jesus. Yes, the seeds of discipleship can sometimes take root even in the most unlikely spots.

Now as Jesus and the crowd leave the city, they come across Bartimaeus. A blind man sitting at the side of the road, begging. And I’ll tell you what strikes me about Bartimaeus. It’s not that he’s blind, or that he's a beggar. What strikes me about Bartimaeus is that he is just sitting by the side of the road. Just sitting there. Now we know from the story that he had been able to see at one time, but not now. And so he just sits there, as other people come and go and pass him by - probably listening in on their conversations, perhaps even imagining their lives, even reflecting on the life he once had, and all the while, he just sits there on the side of the road. Now roads are made for movement, for traveling, for reaching a destination. Roads are meant to take you somewhere. But not for Bartimaeus – he just sits back, going nowhere. Perhaps because he’s depressed or feeling hopeless or frightened. So he does nothing. His situation is such that he not only physically can’t see the world around him, but he also can’t see any new possibilities for his life. He feels stuck in a routine, and his life feels wasted. And so you could imagine him sitting there, thinking about what went wrong. Wishing he was one of the people going past him. Wishing his life had taken a different route. And I’m sure that over time, layers upon layers of disappointment, resentment, anger, build up within him until he is covered in not only a physical darkness, but a spiritual darkness as well. And so he just sits by the side of the road.
And isn’t there a little Bartimaeus in all of us? When we sit back and wish things were different. When we wish our lives had more purpose, our jobs were more fulfilling, our marriage stronger, our health better, our children or grandchildren more attentive, our problems resolved. And yet we just sit back, going no where, doing nothing. We think about our situation, and we blame others, or even blame God. We don’t seek God’s will or plan and we feel lost. And soon layers upon layers build up with us...those same layers of disappointment, resentment, anger. Layers of fear, anxiety, self-pity. And then, there we are, really just sitting by the side of the road of life, immobilized. Stuck in our own spiritual darkness – like Bartimaeus.

Until….until Jesus Christ comes into his life. Now Bartimaeus had obviously heard about Jesus. About his miracles, his teachings, his power, his promises. Even about his claim to be the Messiah – Son of David, and yes, Son of God. Because Bartimaeus shouts out “Son of David, have mercy on me! Son of David, have mercy on me!” So Jesus stops, and he calls Bartimaeus over. And this blind beggar suddenly throws off his cloak and goes to Jesus. Funny that even a blind man can now “see” his way to Jesus. Somehow, Bartimaeus sees the “light of the world” and he goes to Jesus. But not before he throws off his cloak. Now in Jesus’ time, most people wore two garments – an inner tunic and an outer cloak. And often times they didn’t wear a loincloth under their inner tunic. And any educated guess will tell us that Bartimaeus could not afford either a loincloth or inner tunic. His cloak was probably the only possession he owned. And when he went running to Jesus, he threw off the cloak - leaving it by the side of the road. And I could imagine him standing there before Jesus naked. Just as he was. Vulnerable, open, revealed, innocent and honest as the day he was born. With Jesus in sight, Bartimaeus was able to shed all those layers that kept him in his darkness. He threw off his fear, his depression, his hopelessness. He threw off his disappointment, his resentment, his anger. And he stood there, ready to be the person he knew Jesus could make him to be. And Jesus asks him, “What do you want me to do for you?” And Bartimaeus says, “I want to see again.” I want to leave my old life behind and begin anew. I want to see the purpose and direction you have for my life. I want to see who I am meant to be.

And isn’t that what we want too? To throw off those layers which cover us in darkness. To peel back those layers of frustration, bitterness, and hurt. We all have some habit, some attitude, some action that we need to be rid of. Maybe we need to peel off the layers of shame, indifference, mediocrity, intolerance, selfishness, narrow-mindedness. Perhaps it’s our self-centeredness, hard-heartedness, the
need for control, desire to manipulate others. Maybe we need to peel back the expectations of what we want for our life and stand naked before Jesus asking what he wants for our lives. To be open and honest and vulnerable before our Lord and Savior and say, “Have mercy on me, Lord! Have mercy on me!” I want to leave my old ways behind and follow you. I want to be exposed for who I am, so that I can become who I am meant to be.

St. Paul tells us that we are to “clothe ourselves with Jesus Christ.” To put on Christ. And so imagine peeling back those layers you want to be rid of, and putting on Jesus Christ instead. Paul also says, “If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” And that’s what we celebrate today – at the table of Jesus Christ. The old is gone, and we are made new. Isn't that really what we all want? I think so. That's why this song by John Bell song is so appropriate this Communion Sunday. Let me sing it for you.

Take, O take me as I am,
Summon out what I shall be.
Set your seal upon my heart,
And live in me.

(Repeat, repeat with congregation)

Amen.

* With credit to Rev. Grace Imathiu for some of these sermon thoughts.