

What Do You Want?

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver at
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Mark 10:46-52

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Today's lesson from Mark is a truly splendid story. It's one of those compelling vignettes in which we can so easily lose ourselves, and find ourselves, if we are willing.

Imagine you're in that crowd, travelling with Jesus. You're leaving Jericho, a storied place in the collective memory of Israel: here is where Joshua and the people laid claim to the land of Canaan; here is where they marched round the city walls, which ultimately tumbled before the children of slaves; here is where the sun stood still, where nature deviated from the norm in affirmation of the divine promise to the chosen people.

Jericho.

It's the stuff of legend, a place deeply steeped in history.

It's a place like Concord, Massachusetts. Hear that name and maybe you think of the Revolution, or minutemen and redcoats; or you might recall Thoreau and Walden Pond, or the Alcott sisters. Maybe it's the Transcendentalists who come to mind.

Yet Concord isn't just a place name from the past; it's also a living, community of the present.

There are parking meters in Concord, and a hardware store and boutiques. ATMs and supermarkets, gas stations and schools. A highway, Route 2, with a rotary that will offer a new perspective on rush hour traffic to any Upper Valley commuter who has ever complained about backups on Route 120.

Concord isn't just a place inhabited by the ghosts of William Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, or Louisa May Alcott. It's a suburb filled with people who love, loath, work, rest, cheat, steal, provide, care, dream and desire.

With regard to the fundamentals of human existence, it's a place like Jericho in the time of Jesus. A place with a history, a town that can point to the past and declare, "we mattered!" But also a place with a present, with people getting on about the business of life. A place with people like you and me.

And so, it was from this living, breathing community that Jesus, his disciples, and a growing band of followers departed. Their destination? Jerusalem.

Now the lectionary doesn't tell us this, but we've reached a turning point in the story of Jesus. Chapter Ten of Mark is all about transition. Jesus' itinerant teaching ministry is about to come to an end; his rendezvous with destiny is about to commence. From Jericho, Jesus and his followers will go to Jerusalem, City of David, where Jesus will confront the authorities, civil and religious, with his outrageous claims to a new kind of kingship.

But that's in the future. In the present, Jesus and his excited followers are getting ready to leave town. Those followers are ready. They're eager. They're probably impatient. And just as they think they're ready to hit the road and be on their way, Bartimaeus, this beggar, this blind nobody – according to Scripture he's called the 'son of Timaeus'; his own name isn't of sufficient importance to be recorded or remembered – calls out to Jesus.

We know what happens next. The locals try to shush him. Now, before we start tut-tutting, let's be honest with ourselves. Imagine some big shot, say, oh, a presidential candidate came to town, something not unheard of in these parts. And imagine that in the middle of our visitor's appearance at the Opera House or speech in Colburn Park, a dirty, scruffy person began calling out loudly, insistently for attention. Local officials, party leaders, and regular citizens alike would all groan. "Not helpful," many would think. "Governor so-and-so or Senator What's-his-name will think we're all nuts. This is going to look awful on WMUR, sound terrible on NHPR and VPR, make for an embarrassing story in the Valley News. If only this guy would shut up and go away."

So, bearing this in mind, think about those people, those followers of Jesus and residents of Jericho, as they try to silence Bartimaeus. But Bartimaeus won't be silenced, and Jesus is interested in what he has to say.

This is when the story begins to get really interesting.

Let's take a moment to consider the scene. Let's imagine ourselves in the crowd, wearing our robes, tunics, and sandals. We're drawn to the new teacher, even though we're not always sure what it is he's saying. There's all this stuff about a new kingdom. We like that.

He seems to be talking about kicking out the Romans, recovering our independence. Though there are those really strange parables, those stories we can't quite figure out. Still, we want to follow him to Jerusalem. He's got charisma, he's a magnetic leader, he's the one for us. We're ready to go, we believer, wherever Jesus wants to take us. But instead of leading us forward, Jesus turns to ... a beggar, a blind beggar?

What gives?

We heard the blind man call to Jesus, though we may not have focused on what it was he said. We then noticed that some people encouraged the man – “Take heart, get up, he is calling you” – while others mocked him – “Take heart, get up, he is calling you.” Then we saw this man actually get up and approach Jesus! And then to our amazement, we watch as this man, of all the people in the crowd, forges a connection with Jesus.

“Why?” we wonder. “Why him?”

The answer, of course, is to be found in what Bartimaeus says, specifically what he calls Jesus: Son of David.

Now let's be clear. Titles don't matter to Jesus; he isn't on an ego trip. But he does know that the way people see him, what they call him, reveals something vital about how they will interact with him. So, see him as, call him, Jesus of Nazareth, in this situation, and one might be understood to think of him as a teacher, a man of great insight and wisdom, perhaps the leader called for by the times.

But to call him Son of David. Well, that's a different matter. A different matter entirely.

By calling Jesus “Son of David” Bertimaeus has publicly acknowledged Jesus as the messiah, the anointed one, the savior of Israel. He, Bertimaeus is claiming, is the one with the power to set things right. Jesus isn't just some teacher – though he'll call Jesus that – but something, someone, much greater. He's *Rabbouni*, my teacher, my *master*. Jesus is the heir of David, Israel's legitimate ruler. Herod – in your face! Caesar Augustus – take a hike! If anyone can help Bertimaeus, the blind man suggest, it's Jesus.

And so, Jesus, recognizing that this blind man may see what even his closest followers miss, asks a question:

“What do you want?”

We know what the blind man says: he wants to see again.

An obvious answer, no? Who wouldn't want to have his or her sight restored?

But who, really, would think Jesus capable of doing such a thing? The logical thing for Bartimaeus to do would be to ask for assistance. Indeed, in Jesus' day, "Have mercy upon me," would have been understood as a plea for alms. If Jesus responded, perhaps others, following his example, would too.

But money is not what the blind man wants. He wants to see again.

He doesn't know what sight will mean for him going forward – other than, we might assume, a life different, hopefully better, than the one he has known. And while that might seem like a very good thing indeed – there were no provisions for the differently abled in those days; no Judean or Roman equivalent of the Americans With Disabilities Act legislating accommodation for those with a vision impairment; indeed, not much sympathy since many of Bartimaeus' contemporaries would have viewed blindness as a divine punishment for his sins and thus treated him accordingly – it would still require letting go of the familiar, relinquishing the known.

But Bartimaeus is not deterred.

Armed with nothing more than memories and hope, he's ready, he's willing to take a chance, to try something new. And we know this not just because of what he asks, but because of what he does in the wake of Jesus' reply.

"Go," Jesus tells Bartimaeus, "Your faith has made you well."

But he doesn't go. Instead he follows Jesus. He becomes a disciple.

Imagine that.

Talk about gratitude! Talk about new life!

His sight restored, Bartimaeus doesn't hurry off to see all the things he's wanted to see for so long. Having lost his sight, he lost the ability to engage in so many activities. Does he rush off to do those things? No. Instead, he takes this gift and puts it to work for God by following Jesus. He joins that throng of curious, enthusiastic people and joins the procession, the one that is heading to Jerusalem, the one we commemorate on Palm Sunday. There will be cheering and hosannas and much excitement and we can presume that Bartimaeus will be there.

What a wonderful new chapter in this man's story.

He's found a way. He's found The Way.

End of story? Roll the credits?

Not quite – for the question Jesus posed remains. “What do you want?” Answered once, it must be answered again. The road of discipleship, the Way of Jesus is not easy. We know how the story unfolds. We know that Peter and the others will fall away from Jesus in the dark hours ahead. So, too, we must infer, will Bartimaeus.

But what will happen then? What will happen afterwards?

In the wake of the cross, will Bartimaeus drift away? Will he be disillusioned, lost, heart-broken? Will he forget what Jesus told him?

“Your faith has made you well.”

Or will he remember that encounter? Will he be able to draw on that faith again? Will Bartimaeus be able to heal himself and others by believing in and proclaiming the Risen Christ? Will he become one of those founders of the early church who shared stories of Jesus, of the new life he made, he makes, possible?

It all depends.

It all depends on how Bartimaeus chooses to answer Jesus’ question, “What do you want?”

It’s a question that will follow Bartimaeus, the once-blind man, throughout his life.

It’s a question that follows us, too.

What do you want? What do I want?

In a spiritual sense, each of us is blind. All too often we are unable to see the blessings that God has bestowed on us, unable to recognize the opportunities for healing and growth God has offered to us, unable to focus on the chance to serve God’s people. We are blinded by anxiety, fear, resentment, despair, pretentiousness, presumptuousness, and, yes, sin.

We, like Bartimaeus, are sitting by the roadside as Jesus approaches. Yet by our presence here, we reflect a belief, a hope, maybe just a hunch, that there’s something special about the man from Nazareth, no, the Son of David.

And so we call out to him, asking him to be cured of what ails us, freed from what binds us.

He turns to us. And he responds with a question of his own.

“What do you want?”

What do you want? What do I want?

Do we want to win the lottery?

No, nothing so crass, we say. We're not the kind of Christians who preach the Prosperity Gospel, after all.

Okay. Fine.

Do we want things to go our way? Do we want those with whom we disagree to finally relent and acknowledge that we are right? Do we want everyone to see things the way we see them? Do we want to be affirmed, told we need not grow anymore, that we've reached spiritual perfection and can now kick back and enjoy the fruits of our faith?

Or do we want to throw aside all that ties us to our old lives, our old way of doing things so we can walk with Jesus?

Do we want to be his disciples, following him wherever he may lead us, even if it takes us to a cross?

Do we want our sight restored, so that we might once again see the life that our Creator wants each of us to live, a life filled with grace, and hope, and love?

What do we want?

God is waiting for our answers.