

Psalm 34:1-8
Mark 10:46-52

22nd Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
October 24, 2021

A Blind Man's Plea

Introduction to the Psalm

Our psalm for the 22nd Sunday of Pentecost is a thanksgiving psalm. It is intended for use by people who have moved through trouble and distress, and are now enjoying security on the “redeemed” side of the turmoil. Listen to these words from Psalm 34:1-8...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel Lesson today we find Jesus going out of Jericho with his disciples and a large crowd of people. Beside the way is a blind beggar named Bartimaeus. He pleads for Jesus to have mercy. Many in the crowd reveal that while they can see with their eyes, they are spiritually blind. Listen to these words from Mark 10:46-52...

Sermon

The story of Bartimaeus is a story of the beginning of a whole new life. How many there are who long to begin anew. Perhaps you can remember a time in your life when you longed for a new beginning. Perhaps you're longing for a new beginning right now. The story of Bartimaeus can help.

With his disciples Jesus had come down through the wilderness into Jericho, a tropical oasis near the Dead Sea, the deepest depression in the whole earth. Jericho was on the way to Jerusalem, about fifteen miles away. And according to William Barclay, Jesus was on his way to the Passover. And when a distinguished rabbi or teacher was on such a journey, he would often be surrounded by a crowd of people who listened to him while he walked along.

Furthermore, it was laid down that every male Jew over twelve years of age and living within fifteen miles of Jerusalem must attend the Passover. But it was clearly impossible for every such person to go. So those who couldn't, would line the streets where groups of Passover pilgrims must pass, to wish them well on their way.

And there were many priests and Levites who resided in Jericho when they were not on actual temple duty. No doubt, many of them in the crowd that day were eager to see this Jesus who posed a threat to orthodoxy and the current state of Temple worship.

As Jesus was leaving Jericho in the midst of this large crowd, a blind beggar named Bartimaeus heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, and started to cry out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Bartimaeus apparently wasn't concerned about what people might think of him.

Note the striking contrast of on the one hand, this great multitude of people; and on the other, this one lowly person, as low on the social scale as you could get. A young woman walking by me at the library in Greenville noticed that I was working with open books. She stopped and asked me what I was doing. I told her that I was working on a sermon about Bartimaeus. She said it was a wonderful story—and that Jesus could do anything. She said that she was homeless, but nonetheless had just gotten a job at Hardee's, even though they knew she was homeless. Yes, Jesus could heal a blind man, and he could enable a homeless woman to get a job at Hardee's.

Well, in our lesson, the people who were standing around were embarrassed, and they rebuked the blind beggar. "Shut up, Bartimaeus. You're just a blind beggar. Jesus is an important rabbi; he's not going to pay any attention to you. Don't embarrass us all before him." But Bartimaeus cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me."

Here was the cry of a marginalized person. Social Security Disability Income was not there to help. Once, Bartimaeus had been able to see—for notice that he asks to be able “to see *again*.” (v. 51b) But by some accident or illness he had lost his sight. And that took away his ability to work. It confined him to being a kind of first-century street person—a beggar—humiliated, by the roadside, waiting for a handout.

It *is* difficult to lie in a sickbed, to be unemployed or unable to find work; to stand in a soup line, to file for bankruptcy. Such a terrible situation can be the result of an accident, or illness. It can be from the genes we inherited from our parents. It can be from a failed marriage, poor planning, or bad decisions. It can be from the effects of war, or from automation making your job obsolete. It can be from any number of things.

Well, Bartimaeus may have been down, but he wasn't out. So out of his blindness and poverty he let forth a cry of hope. You know, it's when you're down, really down, that it's hardest to hope or believe. It's when everything seems to be going against you, when you've knocked on the door and it has not opened, when the circumstances, or your view of the circumstances have continually beat you down. At that point it's easier to just sit there and be quiet, to give in to those voices that say, “Oh, shut up, we don't want to hear it, you'll never be any better, you're embarrassing us.” But Bartimaeus didn't keep quiet. He cried out, uttering a pleafull prayer, a prayer that has become a part of the liturgy of Holy Communion: “O Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.” A plea for deliverance: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.”

Well, Jesus heard the call of Bartimaeus, stopped in the middle of the road, and said to his disciples, “Call him here.” So they called Bartimaeus, saying, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” And Bartimaeus responded by throwing aside his cloak, jumping up, and coming

to Jesus. For his part, Jesus, amidst all the noise and distraction of the crowd, heard and responded to a blind beggar's leap of faith—because he had ears to hear the cries of sick and suffering people. But “many sternly ordered the blind man to be quiet.” For them Bartimaeus is an annoyance. They have no time for him. They're here to see and hear Jesus. Sadly, many who claim to be disciples of Christ today have tuned out the cries of people like Bartimaeus and have chosen to listen only to other voices— voices of important and healthy people. Jesus heard and responded to the voice of this blind beggar.

Next Jesus gives the man an opportunity to express his faith by asking this question: “What do you want?” And Bartimaeus, in words that are both personal and confessional, naming Jesus as “my teacher,” declares, “I want to see again.” No discourse about how unfair life is, about his struggles, about all the people who had ignored him. Simply, “I want to see again.”

In a dark and unsettled time, what might we gain with improved sight? Through Christ's mercy, perhaps we could have eyes to see blessings, blessings like the gifts of sight, smell, and taste. Perhaps we could detect God's presence, discern the Spirit's movements, distinguish between truths and falsehoods, perceive the path of justice and righteousness. “Lord, let us see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, and follow thee more nearly, day by day.”

“What do you want me to do for you?” According to commentator Lamar Williamson, that question underlines the importance of getting our deepest desires straight. It was the same question that Jesus had asked James and John earlier in this chapter, but they had not got their desires straight—asking that they might sit, one at his right hand and one at his left, with Jesus in his glory. Bartimaeus' response to Jesus shows that he wanted the right thing; and he wanted it the right way. He did not secretly cherish his infirmity. He really wanted to see again, and not have to lead the life of a blind beggar. Bartimaeus expressed his plea plainly and honestly.

Then Jesus did something very interesting. Rather, he didn't do something. He didn't lay hands on him or even touch him. He didn't put anything on his eyes or say any words of healing. He didn't tell Bartimaeus to go wash or to do anything. Jesus simply looked at him and said, "Go your way; your faith has made you well." And immediately, at the sound of Jesus' voice, Bartimaeus received his sight and followed him on the way.

The impact of the story is heightened further when compared to the story of the rich man, earlier in this same chapter (10:17-22), who asked Jesus about inheriting eternal life. Sincere, religious, respectable, and rich, this young man would not part with his possessions. Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, abandons his one possession—his coat—and comes to Jesus in faith, and then becomes a follower, a disciple.

That coat that Bartimaeus cast aside was perhaps his most treasured possession. It had kept him warm through cold nights. And perhaps it held some of the meager spoils of his begging. But at Jesus' call, he throws it off, ready to leave his former life behind, and begin a new life with Jesus.

According to Charles Cousar, who taught New Testament at Columbia Seminary, Bartimaeus is like the unnamed woman with a hemorrhage who earlier in Mark's gospel (5:25-34), only touched the hem of Jesus' garment, and was healed. Her faith had made her well. There are many outsiders in the Markan story who find a prominent place in the Kingdom of God which Jesus brings. A Gerasene demoniac, a Syrophenician woman, a blind man at Bethesda, a healer who is not one of the disciples, and the little children whom Jesus took in his arms and blessed.

Our Gospel Lesson speaks not only of miracle, but also of call. And in fact, Bartimaeus, for whom life had begun anew, set out with Jesus on a journey of discipleship. The physical cure was only part of a complete restoration to the fullness of life. For that day, just out of Jericho, Jesus had healed and salvation had come to blind Bartimaeus.

Now to the One who by the power at work within us
is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think
to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus,
to all generations for ever and ever. (Ephesians 3:20, 21)

Amen.