

BLIND BARTIMAEUS*

Mark 10:46-52

October 25, 2009

It was just days before Passover, the Jewish holiday that always brought a Homecoming Crowd to the temple.

The roads were packed with pilgrims much like 1-35 was packed with Texas and OU fans last weekend. Joining in the traffic moving the 15 miles from the place where Joshua Fought the Battle to the City on a Hill were Jesus and his disciples.

And lining the road from Jericho to Jerusalem was a multitude of beggars—the most pitiful parade of bedraggled and disabled men and women you ever did see.

And somewhere within that teeming mass of need sat a man named Blind Bartimaeus.

Bartimaeus. In Hebrew, his name meant the Son of Timaeus. But the original hearers of this text would have also caught the double entendre of the name. Bar-teymah means “son of poverty” or “son of the unclean” in Aramaic.

In addition, the more educated of the group would have recognized the name Timaeus as a character in one of Plato’s dialogues. In one of the longer speeches in his drama, Plato has Timaeus speaking of how vision and sight worked.

How ironic, then, that this story of Jesus’ last miracle before entering Jerusalem for the last time was of Blind Bartimaeus—who had lived his whole life without physical sight. (“Healing of Bar-Timaeus the Beggar,” Michael A. Turton's Historical Commentary on the Gospel of Mark, “a complete verse-by-verse commentary on the Gospel of Mark, focusing on the historicity of people, places, events, and sayings in the world of the Gospel of Mark.”)

As our scripture opens, there he was sitting by the side of the road, shaking his cup with the few coins he had garnered to try to attract attention, when he heard the people around him softly speaking that Jesus of Nazareth and his disciples were walking by.

At that, the text tells us his shout could be heard above the din of the traffic noise on the by-way. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me."

He made quite a racket—so much so that others standing by him tried to shush him up.

It was not only his volume that was disturbing—it was also what he said that created a stir. "Son of David." This is the one and only time Jesus is addressed by that title in the gospel of Mark—a phrase that echoed down through the ages, hearkening back to the golden age of Jerusalem when King Solomon, the Son of David, ruled the world.

Despite the admonitions from the crowd around him, to, in essence, shut up, Bartimaeus shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me."

The cries of a needy man stopped Jesus and his disciples in their tracks.

So many times the world *chooses* to be blind to the needs of others. The world shuts its eyes to the emaciated bodies of those crying and dying of HIV/AIDS on the continent of Africa—and in our own country. The world shuts out the cries of those who are middle-aged, laid off from jobs because of the economic downturn, not hired because they are over-qualified. The world tries to hush the cries of their elderly homebound neighbors who are being neglected or worse, abused by children or grandchildren.

But Jesus doesn't do that. Jesus stops, turns, and addresses the needs of the ones who cry out.

And those who follow Christ can't help but do the same.

This past week, I encountered reports of the three situations I just named, and how disciples of Christ from different parts of the Church stopped, turned, and attended to the cries of the needy. From our Week of Compassion offering reaching out to those African nations hit hardest, to our North Texas Area and a new job-sharing information web-site, to our own members caring for one of

our vulnerable seniors in our community—I witnessed contemporary Christians radically attending to the needs of those for whom the rest of the world would remain blind.

But the lesson of this scripture does not end there. The text continues with Jesus giving the order to one of his disciples to bring Bartimaeus to him. The disciple calls out to the blind man, saying “Be of good cheer. Rise, He is calling you.”

“Never before had Bartimaeus heard words of encouragement combined with the command, ‘Rise.’ In his past experience, no one had ever responded to any of his calls, except to demand silence. Perhaps even then, he thought, a cruel hoax was in the making.” He couldn’t see the expression on the faces around him, whether they were snickering behind their hands at a trick they might play on him. “He had heard ‘cheer up’ before from callous people who tossed it into his face instead of throwing a coin into his begging blanket.”*

It took courage for Bartimaeus to stand up like the whole man he was, to throw off his beggars cloak and to follow Jesus’ voice with tentative steps. Truthfully, it was a leap of faith for this man who had only shuffled through life his whole life.

From our own places of weakness and vulnerability, Jesus calls to us to rise. What do we do when that call comes?

We all know those people who have been offered Christ’s call to look up, stand up, and go up, and who have remain planted in place. We’ve heard their excuses:

“I just can’t rise, Jesus, I just can’t. I’ve sunk too deep under the relentless weight of my degrading habits. I’ve traded the promises of eternity for the pleasures of the moment. I hate myself as I do it, but I do it anyway, again and again. Even though you call, Jesus, I choose to remain seated because I am a slave to my addictions that keep my mind from thinking of You, my eyes from seeing You, my feet from running to You and my hands from touching You, all of which keep my spirit from resting in You.

"I just can't rise, Jesus. I am consumed by the daily rages of bitterness and resentment. I remember every wrong ever inflicted upon me; I count up every debt and trespass against me. My spirit is driven by anger and I do not try to forgive. There are people I once loved that now I won't talk to. I tell myself that they no longer matter to me. Instead of being freed in charity, I am crippled by callousness. So I think I'll just sit where I am."

"I just can't rise, Jesus. I worship the prides and pretensions of this world. I live for the things my money can buy, instead of the things my soul can only receive for free. I keep an anxious eye on my neighbor, worried that I may be falling behind on the ladder of success. My heart yearns after the vain riches of this world while neglecting the greater riches of the spirit. I put corporation above communion and selfishness ahead of service. So I just think I'll stay put and wallow in my misery." ("Blind Beggars All" by Erskine White)

When Jesus calls, we have a choice to step up and out in faith, just as Bartimaeus did on the road out of Jericho that day.

And for those of us who dig deep, take responsibility, and draw upon the courage to believe, amazing things have been known to happen.

They certainly did for Bartimaeus. When he stood before the Lord, Jesus asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus empowered Bartimaeus to name his own outcome. He didn't assume he knew that Bartimaeus wanted to see. He didn't pretend that he knew what Bartimaeus wanted fixed. He encouraged Bartimaeus to confess his own need.

This is a lesson for all of us who sometime over-zealously try to better the life of another, whether it be within intimate relationships, or between parents and children, or even between those of us who minister to others.

I opened my eyes to this lesson many years ago when I took a youth group to our mission in Jamaica. It was right after hurricane Hugo, and the school which our church runs in the mountains high above Kingston was damaged by the tremendous winds and rains.

We went to paint and do some renovation, and it was a wonderful experience for us all. However, when we walked to the village down the road every evening, we were glared at by some of the men and women we passed along the way, or who were sitting on their front porches.

When I remarked to one of our hosts at the school that their neighbors seemed to be hostile to us, the man shifted uncomfortably and said that most of them were out of work, and needed jobs to help feed their families. They would have loved to have been paid for the work that our group was there doing for free.

My eyes were opened. We had assumed that our help was the answer to a piece of the problem of our brothers and sisters in Jamaica, and in the short term, it was. But it was not the only answer. If only we had asked—if only we hadn't been blinded by our own good intentions.

So Jesus asked, and Bartimaeus responded with the answer he had been seeking all his life. "I want to see, Lord. I want to see. I want to see YOU, Lord, I want to see You."

And in an instant, Jesus said, "Go your way; your faith has made you well." And Bartimaeus' world became real and clear. Spiritually free, physically sound, and humanly dignified, Bartimaeus is pronounced "well" and "whole."

I can't claim to know how Bartimaeus felt that day so long ago, when everything became real and clear. I can only imagine what that must have been like.

Perhaps it was like seeing for the first time those images embedded in the 3-D art that was quite popular a couple of years ago. How many of you remember those brightly colored posters that hung on walls in doctor's offices or other waiting rooms that, when you got up really close to them and let your eyes unfocus for a bit, then slowly back away, you'd be able to see an entirely different picture?

Were any of you able to see the picture within the picture?

I never was able to see anything until someone gave me this book, God's Miracle Eye: Best Loved Bible Stories in 3-D. After trying and trying and trying, all of a sudden, one day, out of the blur of color, I saw it. Or rather, I saw Him! I saw the face of Christ appear as if from out of nowhere from the page. It was remarkable.

Perhaps, just perhaps, it was like that for Bartimaeus, no longer blind.

Perhaps, just perhaps, it was like that for all who traveled that road from Jericho to Jerusalem, who had not truly seen who Jesus was until Bartimaeus announced, "Son of David, have mercy on me."

I wonder, are we able to see Jesus as clearly as did a man born blind name Bartimaeus?

*Much of this sermon was created from the outline given in Mark: The Communicator's Commentary by David L. McKenna, pp. 220-222.