

Mark 10:46-52 (NRSV)

The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus

(Mt 20.29—34; Lk 18.35—43)

⁴⁶ 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. ⁴⁷ When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁸ Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁹ 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.” ⁵⁰ So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹ 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.” ⁵² Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Called by Mercy, Propelled by Hope

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

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Text: *Mark 10:46-52*

“The southward journey at last takes Jesus and his following to Jericho, some fifteen miles northeast of Jerusalem. The next major leg of the journey will take them [southwest] to Jerusalem itself, a wearisome uphill trek.”¹

Here in Jericho we come to the end of a major section of the Gospel of Mark. Next comes the events of Palm Sunday, Good Friday and Easter morning. The large section of the Gospel just before Holy Week is a major teaching section of the Gospel. Three times Jesus explains what comes next. Three times the disciples reject and misread the point. Of course, it's not only the disciples who fail to see clearly. The young man we read of a couple of weeks ago wants to know the price of admission into eternal life. The Pharisees constantly willfully misunderstand and try to trap Jesus. In this major teaching section, no one seems to grasp his meaning. So, it's no coincidence that Jesus heals a blind man at the beginning of this section, beginning at 8:22, and also at the end of the section, in the story we are reading today. It is no accident that this section has as bookends Jesus healing blindness. Today we would be more careful in symbolizing spiritual blindness by stories about physical blindness. But in the setting of the Gospel the stories do double duty. Jesus show compassion in healing physical ailments. But the placement of the two healings at either end also shouts out that spiritual blindness is the topic of concern.

In that sense Bartimaeus, that is, son of Timaeus, represents a counterexample to those who persist in their spiritual blindness. The rich young man walks away, finding the cost of eternal life too high. Bartimaeus, on the other hand, is healed and joins Jesus on his way into Jerusalem.

Let's look at these two characters this morning and see how they differ from one another. It will give us some clues as to why one walks away and the other joins the walk on the way of Jesus.

The rich young man comes to Jesus. The first thing to note is that Jesus is on his way. He's going somewhere. But the rich young man comes up to him. He kneels before him. And no one stops the young man. He's an upstanding, recognized member of the society. The crowd and Jesus' disciples part so that the rich young man can come and converse with Jesus.

Bartimaeus we find at the edge of the road from Jericho to Jerusalem. Bartimaeus, as a blind man in his culture, would have been an outcast. Many would have judged his plight to have been the result of his own sin, in other words, his own fault. Bartimaeus would have had no income and no safety net. So, Bartimaeus is out on the hot and dusty roadside. He shouts to

¹*Craig A. Evans, vol. 34B, Word Biblical Commentary : Mark 8:27-16:20, Word Biblical Commentary, 130 (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002).*

those he hears traveling by, hoping for a bit of food or a coin. This day there comes a small and noisy crowd. He senses an unusual buzz in the group. He inquires, "What's going on?" He learns that it's Jesus of Nazareth. He's heard of Jesus. Immediately, Bartimaeus cries out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

But the first thing to note is that those in the crowd around Jesus tell Bartimaeus to be quiet and shut up. To those following Jesus Bartimaeus is a nuisance, a worthless tramp, a distraction. For the rich young man they stopped the procession and parted the crowd. Bartimaeus they kicked out of the way like trash.

Bartimaeus is undaunted. He cries out again, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus says to the crowd, "Call him over here." The scene is almost like Laurel and Hardy slapstick. The crowd members straighten up their ties, try to recover their dignity and say to the Bartimaeus, the man whom they have been kicking aside, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you."

Bartimaeus throws off his cloak. What a highly symbolic action. Jesus had told the young man to sell his belongings and give the money to the poor. He hung his head and went away. Bartimaeus, on the other hand, instinctively throws off his cloak, the single belonging he was likely to have had. Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and approaches Jesus. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus says. Bartimaeus doesn't ask for eternal life. He doesn't ask for special seats in glory. He asks that he might see.

It is what Jesus has been hoping his followers would ask. Let me see clearly. Let me understand. Let me hear you. Tell me, Lord, what I do not know. But his followers and many others who have come to Jesus have not asked to hear and see and understand, for they have thought that they already did, and they have agendas of their own that preclude taking in Jesus' message.

Bartimaeus approaches Jesus in his need. He asks Jesus for mercy. Bartimaeus knows that he needs Jesus. The rich young man is only looking for affirmation that he was doing fine. The disciples wanted to believe that the sacrifices they had made would buy them glory. This is what Jesus means when he says how hard it is for the rich person to enter the kingdom of God. It's not because wealth is inherently bad. It's not even that you have to give it all away and take a vow of poverty. The problem with the rich young man was that his wealth was his security, and as long as he remained secure, he would not and could not come to Jesus in need. There was no need in his mind to say, "Jesus have mercy on me." The reason that it's hard for the rich person to find their way into the kingdom of God is largely that they have found their security in things that make them blind to their real spiritual need. When anyone trembles before God and truly prays for mercy and for sight, that person, in that moment, hears God's healing voice calling out to them.

Jesus heals Bartimaeus's blindness, and he says to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." But Bartimaeus doesn't go. That is, he doesn't get up from the road, head back into Jericho, and take up a life and livelihood that his sight now would permit him. That is, Bartimaeus doesn't forget his need for mercy as soon as he regains his sight.

I suppose many of us have prayed fervently to God when we have been in a bad situation. Oh God, bring me through this illness. Oh God, just help my children to find their way. Oh God, get me through this moment of trouble. But then many of us, when the storm clouds have passed, may find ourselves back to life as usual. Our need for more mercy may be unperceived.

But Bartimaeus acts differently. “Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.”

When Bartimaeus received his sight, he saw clearly. He saw that his hope lay in God. It’s what the Gospel of Mark means by following Jesus, becoming a disciple.

The society in which Bartimaeus and the rich man found themselves is not so different from ours. In that society some had the things that made them secure, and those people were generally highly regarded. Other people were impoverished or were judged impaired, and they were insecure, and they were outcasts. The goal for those in the first group was to stay secure and highly regarded and maybe try to figure out how to take it with them. While it was very hard to do, the goal for those in the second group, the outcasts and the poor, was most often to get into the first group.

Jesus, however, offered a different economy. Jesus saw the wealthy and secure as especially likely to be bankrupt, because they often placed their hope in the things they had. As Matthew would say, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” And, of course, the same result was a danger for the needy, if they sought simply to mimic the fortunate. To be a follower of Jesus is to be propelled by a hope of a different kind, a hope that recognizes that what will make us whole, ironically, is not found in things or stature that seem to make us secure, but instead they are found in embracing our reliance on the transcendent. As Mark says earlier, it is impossible for us to save ourselves; it is possible only with God.

This is the good news. But one final irony remains. Bartimaeus cries out for mercy, and Jesus restores his sight. But the merciful sight that Bartimaeus receives causes him to see well beyond himself. He recognizes that his trust must be in God. He also becomes a follower of Jesus. He becomes a disciple. Not only does he see beyond himself for his own sake, but as a disciple of Jesus he himself becomes an agent of mercy and hope for others.

Those who seek their own salvation find themselves in a spiral self-involvement and greed that leaves them unsatisfied and miserable, and in the process they are a hazard to others. Those who seek their sight and find God lose their selfish lives and gain their holy lives, and in the process they become a blessing to others. Put that way, it’s not a hard choice, is it? We must but let go and cry out for mercy and open our minds and hearts to God. Easier said than done, I admit. But it is the way to our hope. Amen.