

SERMON: Lessons from a Blind Man

TEXT: Mark 10:46-52

There's a homeless man here in Cape who is familiar to many in the downtown area. He often asks for money or food from every person that passes by. He spends his time sitting on different benches, strolling the sidewalks, sitting at the concrete table in the green space east of the church. Sometimes he's drinking a beer. Most of the time he's drunk. He talks a lot – to himself, or to whoever is listening, I guess. Sometimes he yells and curses; his low, gravelly voice is hard to ignore. As far as I know, he's a nuisance, at best, and a litterbug, at worst. People say that you shouldn't make eye contact with him, and you should cross to the other side of the street if you want to avoid him.

I thought of him when I read the story of Bartimaeus, the blind beggar. I wonder if people back then felt the same way about him that we feel about the homeless around here. Bartimaeus was obviously homeless and basically helpless, wandering around, looking for shade in the heat or shelter from the cold. When he was hungry, he begged for food. When he was parched, he begged for something to drink. I imagine many people thought he was a nuisance. I imagine people becoming impatient with him and tried to avoid him.

Every time I hear the story of Bartimaeus, I am reminded of an interim pastor in the church where I grew up. I was just a kid, but I remember that I liked him because he was funny. He caught everyone's attention when, at the start of his sermon one day, he came out from behind the pulpit and sat on the chancel steps. He sort of reclined there, like he was settling in. Then he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Obviously, he was playing the part of Bartimaeus, as he kept crying out. "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Beyond this powerful, dramatic portrayal, I don't remember any of the sermon. But he certainly woke everyone up with all that yelling! It may have even bothered some people in the church to hear such a loud ruckus in God's sanctuary.

The people in the town of Jericho were also bothered by the loud ruckus coming from the blind man. They were probably embarrassed. Jesus was nearby, and this beggar was making a scene, making the town look bad. "Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

A few months ago, I read some comments between two colleagues in a post on Facebook about all the protests happening around the country for one cause or

another. One said she felt compassion for those who were suffering injustice, and she prayed for peace and a better life for them. “But screaming voices are not helping anyone,” she said. The response from the other colleague was an understanding that “cries of protest come from a place of desperation when voices are not being heard.”

Certainly, Bartimaeus was feeling desperate, and perhaps sensing that his only hope was in Jesus. He had been ignored for so long; he needed Jesus to hear him. He needed to scream in order to find help.

Jesus did hear him. And Jesus stopped. He said, “Call him here.”

Jesus stopped. He had crowds following him and he was on his way out of town. But he stopped for one person crying out for mercy.

One of my biggest regrets is due to a missed opportunity when I was living in Springfield. I was on my way to a meeting at church and I had my daughter with me because she didn’t want to stay home alone. It was cold outside, and as we drove we saw a woman carry several plastic bags full of groceries. My daughter, Shelby, wanted to stop and help the woman. But I didn’t want to be late

for the meeting; it was part of my job. I told Shelby I thought she'd be alright. I assumed she was headed to an apartment complex nearby. Actually, I missed two opportunities: one, to see that my ministry is sometimes right in front of me rather than in a meeting room at church. And two, I missed the chance to teach my daughter about helping others. In fact, she was teaching me, and I wouldn't listen.

“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked, as Bartimaeus stood before him. It seems like a dumb question, right? I mean, clearly Bartimaeus was blind. But one theologian suggested that Jesus was not asking in order to get information. “Jesus,” she wrote, “offers the dignity of asking someone long sidelined and silenced to speak for himself, to have his voice heard, honored and tended. Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of David, refuses to assume he knows what is best for Bartimaeus.” (Jill Duffield, *Looking Into the Lectionary*, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, October 22, 2018)

There's been some discussion and controversy in recent years about charity work and mission trips. *Toxic Charity* is the title of a book written by Robert Lupton and published in 2011. Sometimes our well-intentioned giving does more harm than good. In an interview, the author explained: “Typically, the giving is one-way: those of us with the resources give to those with a lack of resources.

One-way giving tends to make the poor objects of pity, which harms their dignity. It also erodes their work ethic and produces a dependency that is unhealthy both for the giver and the recipient.” (Josef Kuhn, *Urban Activist and Author Relates Problems with Charity Work*, www.huffingtonpost.com, 10/12/2011) Another problem I’ve heard about arises when the giver decides what the recipient needs. When mission is done *to*, rather than *with* a person or group of people.

“My teacher,” Bartimaeus said, “let me see again.” Jesus then replied, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight. But Bartimaeus didn’t “go” as Jesus directed. Bartimaeus “followed him on the way.”

It’s not unusual for Jesus to heal someone and then tell them to go. We have heard this in several other stories in the gospels. Some scholars suggest this shows that Jesus expects nothing in return. The healing is a gift. It is free. No strings attached. But Bartimaeus recognizes that healing is not the only gift he has received. He has been transformed. He has been given new life.

Why would he go back to where he came from? That was his old life when he was a beggar. He has no need to beg any longer. He can see. In more ways than one, his vision has been restored. This encounter with Jesus has allowed

Bartimaeus to envision a life of purpose and meaning. Perhaps he follows Jesus on the way so that he can give as he has received – the gift of mercy, the gift of justice, the gift of being noticed, being heard, being respected.

His desire for healing was strong enough that he was willing to make a scene and cry out for mercy in the midst of a crowd that preferred to ignore him. And when Jesus said, “Your *faith* has made you well,” Bartimaeus apparently understood that in order to *stay* well, he needed to live his faith and follow Jesus – not just long enough to say thank you – but all along the way, every day of his life.

Our faith must inform our words and our actions – not just on Sunday morning – but every day of our lives.

Jesus didn't hate. Jesus never said that those of another faith were bad or needed to be destroyed. Jesus was a Jew. He was living by the scriptures that Jews still study and follow today. He was known as the Son of David – a Jewish king. And he was sent by God to the Jews, God's chosen people.

Where did we ever get the idea that they should be destroyed? They didn't crucify Jesus. Greedy, selfish, powerful humanity crucified Jesus. Our faith does

NOT teach us to hate or destroy others. Our faith must be grounded and lived out of the two greatest commandments which Jesus gave: First, to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. The same God whom the Jews love and worship. And second, to love our neighbor as ourselves. All neighbors of every race, religion, gender, culture, ethnicity, or political party.

Our faith is the only thing that can make us well in this country. More guns in more hands will not make us well. Money will not make us well. Power will not make us well. Walls will not make us well. Hate will not make us well.

Only Christ can make us well. Every thought, word, and deed must come from our faith in Christ and the all-encompassing love he demonstrated. And this does not start with the other guy. It starts with the person we see in the mirror every morning. I, we – you and me – must stop the hateful, violent, dehumanizing, dishonest, divisive rhetoric we use to talk about those who disagree with us.

Winning elections with this kind of behavior is no win at all. Winning elections at all costs is NOT our highest priority. We must stop this. This does not come from our faith. This does not come from Jesus.

Jesus has healed and saved every single one of us. His words are to us:
“Go, your faith has made you well.” May we follow him every day, with every
word and deed, everywhere we go and with every person we meet. May we follow
him all the way to cross... to the glory of God!

AMEN.