

Sunday, October 24, 2021
Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 25 (Year B)

Mark 10.46-52

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1188041868353390>

(Sermon begins at about 21:55)

“What Do You Want Me to Do for You?”

On the surface, today’s Gospel reading seems to be a bit ho-hum. Nothing particularly exciting. Just Jesus healing a blind beggar. And while that was certainly a spectacular event for those who witnessed it and certainly for the one healed, to those of us who know Jesus, this is nothing unusual. As recorded in the Gospels, he’s healed numerous people throughout his ministry. In fact, this is a pretty straightforward account of a routine healing. Maybe the only thing that is out of the ordinary about this story is the fact that such stories do not generally tell the name of the person healed. But here, we are told his name. Bartimaeus. Which might indicate that there is something different, something special, about this particular story. So, what does this account of a routine healing have to say to us?

As is often the case, there are many things going on in this story that are not readily apparent. The first thing of particular note about this story is the timing. Jesus has predicted his Passion three times and is now heading toward Jerusalem, where all that will play out. What we hear today is literally the last recorded event (at least in Mark’s Gospel) before Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on what we now know as Palm Sunday. That means, this is his last healing. This is his last miracle. The events we hear today are meant to wrap up Jesus’ Galilean ministry. As such, this simple story of healing is really meant to provide a summation of what the last three years have been about. What Jesus’ ministry of teaching and healing have been about. And what discipleship—what following Jesus—is really all about.

When Bartimaeus hears that Jesus of Nazareth is nearby, he calls out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me” (Mk 10.47). Referring to Jesus as the Son of David is certainly an odd choice of words. Certainly, for someone who had never met Jesus. “Son of David” was a term that was sometimes used to refer to the long-awaited Messiah. Recognition that the Messiah would be of the House of David. That the Messiah would be a great king and liberator, in the model of King David. But this is the first time the term is used in Mark’s Gospel. The first time it is applied to Jesus, alluding to his role as Messiah. Was Bartimaeus just guessing that Jesus was the Messiah based on the stories he had heard? Was Bartimaeus just using this term as a way of trying to get Jesus’ attention? Or did Bartimaeus have some insight about Jesus’ true identity? We cannot be sure. But the implication is certainly that this simple blind man was somehow able to see what others could not. That this blind man was able to see something about Jesus that his own disciples had not been able to see, even after three years with him. Bartimaeus may have been physically blind, but he certainly was able to see with the eyes of faith who Jesus was. And to see what Jesus could do for him.

Jesus appears to be impressed with the insight demonstrated by Bartimaeus. He is literally stopped in his tracks. “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’” (Mk 10.49). Three times, the word “call” is used. While this is not, strictly speaking, a story of Jesus intentionally calling Bartimaeus to discipleship, the wording does bring to mind Jesus calling his disciples early in his ministry. Is Bartimaeus being called to follow Jesus? After Jesus restores his sight, he tells Bartimaeus, “Go; your faith has made you well” (Mk 10.52a). No indication on Jesus’ part that he wanted or expected Bartimaeus to follow him.

And yet, Bartimaeus responds as if he is being called to follow Jesus. In anticipation of this eventuality, we are told that when he goes to Jesus, he throws off his cloak. Perhaps a casual action so that he could move more quickly to get to Jesus. But as a poor beggar, his cloak would have been one of his only possessions. And a prized one at that, serving as protection from the elements and as a blanket for warmth on cold nights. So, a beggar throwing off such a valuable possession signals a dramatic shift in who Bartimaeus is. Or who he will become. In fact, “Mark often uses ‘cloaks’ to symbolize a dramatic shift, such as a person leaving behind the old order of things.”^{1,2} So the signs are all there, even if this is not truly a call narrative.

When Jesus asks, “What do you want me to do for you?” Bartimaeus responds “My teacher, let me see again” (Mk 10.51). This is in stark contrast to last week’s Gospel when Jesus asked the very same question of two of his disciples (Mk 10.36). And what did James and John want? “Grant us to sit, one at your right and one at your left, in your glory” (Mk 10.37). They wanted glorification for themselves. Not glorification of Jesus. Not glorification of God. Not glorification of one who was infirmed and marginalized. Quite the opposite of what Bartimaeus asks for. Some have noted that Bartimaeus provides a perfect example of an appropriate response to Jesus’ question, “What do you want me to do for you?”

What Bartimaeus is asking for—“let me see again”—is not just about restoration of physical sight. That is certainly a part of it. A huge part of it. But there is also a spiritual dimension, whether Bartimaeus himself knows it or not. Although Jesus certainly recognizes it. “Go, your faith has made you well.” In the Gospels, physical and spiritual healing often go hand-in-hand. In the case of Bartimaeus, he already had some rudimentary faith, demonstrated by him recognizing who Jesus was and calling out to him. Rather than accept his societally imposed position of a blind beggar who should stay out of the way and remain silent, Bartimaeus recognizes that he is a beloved child of God just like everyone else. That as a beloved child of God, he is entitled to the same love and mercy that everyone else is entitled to. He recognizes this. He claims it as his own. And in return, for his recognition of and confidence in what Jesus has to offer, he is made whole in body and in spirit. His physical healing has restored him to his rightful place in society. It has restored him to his rightful place in the community of faith. In so doing, his relationship with God has not only been restored, but strengthened.

The depth of his spiritual restoration is further exemplified in the fact that instead of going about his own business, Bartimaeus, upon regaining his sight, chooses instead to follow Jesus on the way. He has such faith in who Jesus is, such gratitude for what Jesus has done for him, that he decides rather than go back to his old life—to the life he might have had before he became blind—that he is going to take a new path. To follow Jesus. Without hesitation.

Without any apparent regard for where that path might lead. That is true faith. That is true discipleship.

As one commentator so deftly summarizes today's pericope, "Mark presents Bartimaeus as an ideal disciple; though he is blind, he exceeds the disciples in insight; though he is a poor beggar, he exceeds the rich man in leaving behinds his possessions; and though the cross is just around the corner, he does not 'Go,' as Jesus tells him to do, but rather courageously follows Jesus 'on the Way.'"³ In so doing, Bartimaeus effectively becomes the last disciple to join the fold.

There is something else significant in Jesus' question. This question, "What do you want me to do for you?" is particularly poignant. It's pretty obvious just looking at Bartimaeus what he wants. No, this question indicates that whatever is about to happen is not just Jesus doing something to or for Bartimaeus. That it is not just a passive event. In asking this question, Jesus is indicating that he wants Bartimaeus to play an active role in his own healing and restoration to society. That he wants Bartimaeus to be engaged in what happens next. And in what follows from it. He certainly does that by acting out of faith. By asking that his deepest needs be fulfilled. Needs, not self-centered desires, as we saw with James and John. By being so bold, so confident to approach Jesus, trusting that he can and will provide what he needs. Trusting that he can and will provide the healing and restoration he so earnestly desires. The healing and restoration that we all need and so earnestly desire. The healing and restoration that God desires for all his people. That is true and abiding faith.

This story, while simple in its presentation, carries a significant amount of meaning for us as those who follow Jesus. Just as some bystanders say to Bartimaeus when he calls out to Jesus: "Take heart; get up, he is calling you," so, too, can we take heart that Jesus calls each of us. He is calling us into discipleship. Not particularly what he was calling Bartimaeus to, but which Bartimaeus freely took on in grateful response. But, as with Bartimaeus, Jesus does ask us to step forward and to take an active part, to be fully engaged, in our own healing and restoration. By being confident that Jesus can bring about our healing and restoration. By being so bold as to taking our needs to him in faith. Whatever it is in our life that requires healing, that requires restoration. So, when Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" how will you respond?

¹ "Your Faith Has Made You Well: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Twenty-Second Week after Pentecost," SALT, October 18, 2021. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/10/23/your-faith-has-made-you-well-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-twenty-third-week-after-pentecost>.

² For examples, see Mark 2.21, 11.7-8, and 13.16.

³ "Your Faith Has Made You Well."