

Next Sunday (and October 1), the Outreach Initiative has organized two incredible opportunities for all of us to come together for a “Come and Be Fed” event that will invite us and show us how to connect and engage more with one another. I hope you will sign up. Logistics are outlined in the bulletin insert and online, but the most important element is the heart of the conversations we will have together.

This is where our scripture text for today comes in. I will be working to unpack this story today, and next week as well, as a foundational component for our conversations, but I assure you that even if you aren’t able to come to the event next Sunday or on October 1, there is still much to glean and apply.

Read Mark 10:46-52

Part 1 today will focus on the elements of the story itself and what they offer us. Part 2 next week will branch out of Jesus’ question to Bartimaeus and how we might understand our opportunity as the church to embody Christ’s example and be there for one another as Jesus was there for Bartimaeus.

Part 1

The story of Jesus healing Bartimaeus has been a popular source of inspiration for artists throughout the centuries. A Google search reveals dozens of examples of paintings and sculptures from the ancient to the modern depicting this scene: mostly of Jesus standing and Bartimaeus kneeling, although we don’t necessarily get that detail in our text. The look on Jesus face is stoic; Bartimaeus ranges from desperation to complete submission.

But what is it about this story that sets it apart from all the other healing stories that Jesus undertakes as a source of inspiration? I’d suggest this morning that it comes down to the central question asked by Jesus to this particular person, in this particular way, at this particular moment. Each of these things gives weight story, gives importance to interaction, and gives humanity to this blind beggar named Bartimaeus in a different way than other healing stories.

This interaction and question at the heart of it gives credence to and emphasis on the difference between a very human element: sight...and being able to truly see clearly.

This morning's passage comes at the culminating moment in Jesus' Galilean ministry in Mark. In the verse after our passage today Jesus approaches and enters Jerusalem for the last time, so this story is the final interaction before Holy Week. Throughout Mark's Gospel, the portrayal of Jesus to Mark's likely Roman audience is that of the Divine made flesh; Mark continually points towards the deity of Jesus' works, opting to skip a birth narrative for Jesus all together in order to jump straight to the baptism and ministry. The first portion of the Gospel is Mark revealing the Divine through the balance of miracle worker, healer, and to a lesser extent teacher—Mark doesn't have the long sermon on the mount or long teaching sections, opting instead to utilize the space with miracles and healings. But Mark is intentional about the utilization of the word "Teacher" in his Gospel, balancing that human understanding with the Divine authority of Jesus. Our passage today parallels previous healing stories such as the healings of the leper, Jairus' daughter, the woman with the hemorrhage, and the blind man at Bethsaida—all attempts to show Jesus' abilities to do the miraculous across a wide range. Bartimaeus calling Jesus both "Son of David" and "Rabbi" continues this theme of the culmination of the divine within the human person of Jesus.

What's different about this healing story from those it parallels however, first is the timing—placing it just before the Triumphal Entry in the final movement towards Jerusalem for the Divine Jesus to undertake the final act of His ministry. It's the moment before the big game; all the focus is on what's coming...until it isn't.

The other difference is the central question, which we'll explore in a minute, but first let's take a moment to look around the scene: Jesus and the Disciples walking through Jericho, focused on what was ahead of them, and a crowd gathered around them. Then, out of nowhere a blind beggar cast to the side of the road begins calling out, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" It stands to reason to ask here: What if this blind man had not cried out? What if he had not advocated for himself, cried out for mercy, raised a scene, and bucked all perceived thought on the power dynamic held between him—a blind beggar – and Jesus, the celebrity passing

through town? Presumably Jesus and his disciples, along with the large crowd tramping along behind, would have strode on, unhindered, toward Jerusalem. But Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus, and then continues to do so unrelenting even with the crowd trying to hush him and rebuke him -- to put him back in his place, just as they had undoubtedly done to this man so many times before.

In his cries, Bartimaeus declares Jesus' identity as the "Son of David" – this ancient phrase referring to the Messiah – the Savior. This ability to see Jesus as who Jesus truly was, despite his lack of human sight, stands in contrast to the squabbling by the Disciples, and their inability to grasp the fullness of what Jesus had been telling them throughout Mark's Gospel.

Bartimaeus though, believed in Jesus' goodness, believed in Jesus' willingness to address and empower the poor and needy. Jesus wasn't like the other religious leaders that had passed by Bartimaeus every day - who believed that an individual's poverty or blindness or bad circumstances were a result of God's judgment. Bartimaeus appealed to Jesus according to the revelation of God's character in the Psalms—a God who cares for the poor and the brokenhearted.

And when Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus, what does Jesus do? Jesus, as Mark says, "stopped." Jesus has his face, his sights set on Jerusalem – everything was aiming towards that ultimate destination and task. Jesus knows tensions are mounting politically and religiously. Jesus is on his way to his "ultimate sacrifice" and death. And yet, upon the cry of a blind man for mercy, Mark tells us that Jesus "stopped." Nothing else in Jericho had caught Jesus attention, but in this moment He stops. Time and time again we find that Jesus' agenda is interrupted by unanticipated human need, unscripted cries of desperation. What this reveals to us is that Jesus also sees Bartimaeus. Jesus, in this moment, demonstrates that He has time to really see Bartimaeus.

And then, after calling Bartimaeus to him and while standing still, Jesus asks the question central to this passage and central to why I believe this passage has been the inspiration for so many artists throughout the centuries: “What do you want me to do for you?” It’s a question outside the norm of healing interactions in other places, even though it’s the second time Jesus asks this question in a matter of 15 verses (more on that in a second). This question captures so much about the total interaction: it speaks to Bartimaeus’ beliefs, it speaks to Jesus asking Bartimaeus to know himself, it speaks to trust, and it speaks to not just remaining at surface level but being able to understand the depth of his need. In the question, Jesus implies that divine grace evokes and encourages our human voice and human will. Jesus the Anointed One of God, the very mercy of God incarnate, does not blissfully walk past this beggar, nor does he run roughshod over him, nor does he wave a magic wand to fix a perceived need. Instead, Jesus gives the man room, a space in which to speak to his own humanity.

But it’s an interesting question to this particular man though: “What do you want me to do for you?” The answer seems so obvious—everybody knew the answer. But Jesus is asking something more here—hinting at a power and an ability to mend something deeper than most would understand--that even the Disciples had missed. How do we know? This question in Mark 10:51, is the exact same question Jesus posed to two of his Disciples (James and John) in Mark 10:36.

See, now this passage becomes clearer because this interaction with Bartimaeus stands as an intentional juxtaposition by Mark within the larger context of the Gospel—driving at what the true intent of Jesus’ ministry was. It stands as the difference between mere sight, and being able to see fully. Whereas we see Bartimaeus crying out for mercy undeterred by a crowd trying to silence him in 10:47-48, in 10:35 we see a completely different situation when James and John approach Jesus with the following statement: “They came to him. “Teacher,” they said, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask.”

“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus answered.

“They replied, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.” “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said.

Let’s recap the two: “Jesus, do for us whatever we ask” vs. “Son of David, have mercy on me.” Both statements receive the exact same question, receive the exact same attention from the exact same Jesus – God made flesh. Both are given the space to let loose with whatever request or need is on their heart, and one responds with a “want” while one responds with a “need”; one response is for status while the other is for healing; one response can clearly see the ministry and nature of God made flesh in front of him (even though that person is physically blind) while the other is operating out of something closer to the “vending machine” view of Jesus even though they’ve spent years hearing His teachings and witnessing His works first hand. Exact same question. Two answers that couldn’t have been further apart. Difference in “sight” and being able to see.

I believe this morning that we can only unpack this story and this question of “What do you want Jesus to do for you?” if we understand the statements that led to the two asking: one started with a “selfish want” and the other with a cry for “mercy.” I believe this morning that this connection between mercy and the question Jesus poses is paramount. For James and John the request was birthed out of a desire to see themselves elevated—to attain something that would put them above others. For Bartimaeus, his cry for “mercy” was just that: a cry for Jesus to address the thing that had driven him to his state of marginalization—something that he had undoubtedly tried to overcome on his own and realized that only mercy could alleviate.

Blindness in the ancient world, as we said earlier, was often viewed as a judgment placed on someone because of their sins or the sins of their family. As such, it often led to physically casting the person out of the rest of society so as not to affect or impact the rest of the community—why Bartimaeus found himself as a beggar, dependent on the occasional charity

of the few that often came intermixed with the condemnation and sneers of the many. Bartimaeus' call for mercy and his response of "Rabbi, I want to see" wasn't from a desire to be elevated above anybody, but instead was a naming of the obstacle that kept him from the day to day equality and acceptance of the community around him...which most likely also contained his direct family that had been forced to distance themselves from him and the stigma of judgment that came with the impairment. What Jesus presented to Bartimaeus, what Jesus presents to us, is access to a healing that goes beyond the physical and gets to the heart of what holds us back from right relationship, from acceptance & community. "What do you want me to do for you?" was an invitation to eliminate the hurdle or obstacle standing between Bartimaeus and *wholeness*. Bartimaeus knew that—saw that; the Disciples missed it.

And yet, there's something about Jesus having Bartimaeus name it that holds weight for us too. Everybody knew the major need, everybody knew the main obstacle here. So why name it? Why not just hear the cry for mercy and fix the obvious?

This encounter between Jesus and Bartimaeus points us toward the dignity God has instilled in every human being: the dignity to speak, to cry out to God, to specify what we need, and to exercise a faith in God, who in Jesus Christ has come to show us a deep mercy that leads to wholeness. Jesus knew the need and yet still asked Bartimaeus because Bartimaeus needed to put words to his deepest need. But not just for himself, Church. I also believe Bartimaeus needed to put words to need for the community around him that had ostracized him for so long. Bartimaeus had been shunned because of his not having human sight; but in his request, and in Jesus' response that it was Bartimaeus' faith that healed him Jesus is naming that it is, and always has been, Bartimaeus' ability to truly see – to truly grasp - that makes him whole. The crowd needed to hear, and ultimately to see, that which made Bartimaeus whole as well. That component of him that they had missed; that they hadn't been able to see.

What an awesome statement by Jesus to Bartimaeus: “Go. Your faith has healed you.” For a man that had been routinely trampled, pushed aside, and cut off from society, this is what it looks like to be made whole, to have his dignity affirmed and his value named in order to be restored to his community. And what did that faith look like? A cry for mercy and an honest naming of his greatest need. That’s the good news for us this morning, Church. It’s hard—it’s counterintuitive to our society, but it’s good news.

Bartimaeus understood the depth of the question where the Disciples had fallen short. In seeing Bartimaeus’ ability to grasp what was put before him, Jesus responded in love; in healing; in delighting to make Bartimaeus whole and return him to community; in showing mercy because Jesus, God made flesh divine that is present throughout Mark’s Gospel is the very culmination of mercy leading to wholeness. Even in the midst of Jesus’ most serious and intense moment, the call for wholeness of an individual still took precedence. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem to accomplish a mercy that led to wholeness; he stood still in Jericho long enough to accomplish it too.

So where are we this morning Church? If posed with the question put to Bartimaeus, how would we respond – like James and John or like Bartimaeus? Would we understand “What do you want Jesus to do for you?” as an opportunity for advancement, or as an opportunity to address and overcome the obstacle that keeps us from wholeness as individuals and as a community of faith? Far too often we mistake the offer of salvation or wholeness as the offer for advancement. We place our trust in a false picture of Jesus that offers to make us superior, successful, or sophisticated people. What Jesus is calling us to understand—what Bartimaeus understood—is that wholeness comes when we can truly see ourselves as the complete picture of who God created us to be through the power of God’s mercy and healing. Nothing needs elevating or added; it’s just a grasping of what’s already there, often hidden behind the obstacle in our path. But we need to be able to name those areas that hold us back, that prevent us from reaching fullness. That’s the thing Christ calls us to name, to

willingly cry out for mercy over, because we see over and over that God in Christ is merciful and desires us to live a life of right relationship with ourselves, with each other, and with God.

“What do you want me to do for you?”, Jesus asked Bartimaeus.” Jesus, emissary, indeed the very embodiment of the reign, rule, and presence of God in the world is willingly asking that question—to the Disciples, to the blind beggar Bartimaeus, and to us. Do we have the vision, the depth of sight, and the willingness to enter into uneasy places to name that which holds us back?

The blind man said, “Rabbi, I want to see.” “Go,”

said Jesus, “your faith has healed you.” Thanks

be to God. Amen.