

Lectionary 30 (B)
October 24, 2021
Text: Mark 10:46-52

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Over the last couple of weeks, the Gospel of Mark has presented us with some of Jesus' most challenging teachings. Two weeks ago, we had Jesus' words about wealth, that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for the wealthy to enter the Kingdom of God. Then last week we had Jesus' words about serving others, that the one who is truly great will look like a slave when it comes to caring for their neighbors in need. Our reading for this morning is a wonderful change of pace, as it suggests that Jesus' challenging way of love leads to new life—to a life made whole. But it will be helpful to recall those challenging stories because in contrast to the rich man who was too attached to his possessions to be able to follow Jesus, and in contrast to the disciples, James and John, who were jockeying for positions of privilege for themselves, finally here is someone who really gets who Jesus is, really sees what Jesus is up to.

If you're like me, it's probably all too easy to recognize yourself in the disciples who fail to understand Jesus, again and again; or in the rich man who was so attached to his possessions that he couldn't follow Jesus. It's not hard to do that. But maybe this morning we can recognize ourselves in blind Bartimaeus, who called out to Jesus in faith and then followed Jesus on the way. I think Mark wants us to see Bartimaeus as a kind of role model, or an example of true discipleship. At each point of the story, the blind man shows us something about what really seeing Jesus is all about.

First, when Bartimaeus heard about Jesus, heard that Jesus was there, he called out to him in faith. He trusted that Jesus could help him. And I think that is at the very heart of Christian faith—trust that Jesus can help us. It may be that we are just so aware of our limitations, how our own wisdom and strength are so insignificant in the face of the challenges we experience every day. We just feel lost, so we cry out like Bartimaeus: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." Or maybe we are so aware of our inner brokenness, that life has wounded us. Maybe it feels like we are going through a crucible of hurt. So we cry out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." Or maybe we are just so very aware of our failures. We know that we have caused hurt to those we love most. And we cry out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." We cry out, like blind Bartimaeus, because we have heard the promise that Jesus will help us. Jesus will forgive us. Jesus will welcome us with mercy and acceptance. Jesus' love and compassion have healing power. We have heard that Jesus has wisdom and a way of living that are full of blessing and hope—and we want that. That's the root of Christian faith—trusting that Jesus has what we need most, and calling to him for help.

Next, even though the crowd tried to silence him, Bartimaeus would not be deterred. They told him shut up, but he cried out even more loudly. He was persistent. He was determined. He wouldn't let other people get in the way of reaching out to Jesus. And I wonder if you can see yourself there too. Here you are on a Sunday morning. Lots of other people in Oregon are sleeping in, or reading the newspaper. But here you are in worship, giving your attention to

Jesus, bringing your prayers before God. And you're not letting the attitudes of other people get in your way. You are persistent about reaching out to Jesus for his help.

Then, when Jesus called Bartimaeus to come to him, the blind man threw off his cloak and sprang up and came to Jesus. As one of the poorest of the poor, his cloak was probably one of the very few things Bartimaeus owned. We might imagine that, as he sat beside the road begging, he would spread it out on his lap, hoping that some compassionate person passing by might drop a coin on it. But when Jesus called, he cast his cloak aside and sprang up to go to Jesus. There's a kind of joyful exuberance in his movement. He's like the opposite of the rich man who couldn't imagine parting with his possessions in order to follow Jesus—and so he went away grieving. This is a challenging part of the story, and Bartimaeus challenges us to consider our own "attachments," and how free we are to follow Jesus in his way of compassion and generosity.

Jesus then asked Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" It's the very same question that Jesus asked James and John in our reading last week, when they approached him and said, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask." "What do you want me to do for you?" But where James and John were angling for special positions, special privileges, special power to lord it over others, Bartimaeus asked only for what he needed. "Teacher, let me see again." It's sort of like how we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread"—in your mercy give us what we need each day. Bartimaeus didn't need to pile up treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume, and thieves break in and steal. He wasn't building his own kingdom, because he was looking for God's kingdom, and his possessions wouldn't be an obstacle for him.

Then, the hinge of the story, the mysterious heart of the story: Bartimaeus receives from Jesus what he needed. Jesus said, "Your faith has made you well." And Bartimaeus received his sight, his wholeness. He received illumination. And faith is how we receive Jesus' gifts too. When we come to Jesus with our needs, our limitations, our woundedness, our failures—faith is trusting that Jesus' forgiveness is for us. Jesus' compassion is for us. Jesus' acceptance and blessing are for us. Faith is how the healing power of Jesus' love becomes healing power for us. Faith is how we entrust ourselves to Jesus and his wisdom, so that his blessing can begin to work in our hearts. It isn't like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz. It turned out she already had what she needed to get back to Kansas all along. Instead, it's because we don't have what we need that we turn to Jesus. And opening our hearts to him—in faith—is how we experience his gift of mercy as a gift of mercy for us, and how we receive all that Christ has to give.

Finally, Bartimaeus followed Jesus on the way. In part, that means he followed on the road to Jerusalem. But I also think Mark means for us recognize that Bartimaeus is showing us what being a follower of Jesus is all about. It is being called by Jesus and turning to him in faith, and receiving Jesus' mercy, and then following Jesus in his way of compassion and forgiveness. The earliest Christians called themselves "followers of the way." The heart of our identity really isn't in the doctrines the Church teaches or the formulations of Christian faith. The heart of our

identity is following Jesus in his way of love and service of others, his way of humility and generosity—which is his way of bringing God’s healing power to the human family.

I suppose it’s ironic that through this central part of Mark’s Gospel, the only person who really sees Jesus is Bartimaeus, the blind beggar. But then, maybe that’s no more surprising than how Jesus’ way leads to victory. Jesus rejected all of the predictable human beliefs about power and prestige and greatness and status and wealth. He rejected all of the conventional wisdom about how to deal forcefully with enemies, and be sure to look after number one, and all the rest. Jesus’ way to victory lead through Jerusalem, and through the cross, and through death. And on Easter morning it leads to resurrection and new life. Jesus’ work is healing the human family. And that healing will only come by following Jesus’ way—of love, of service, of forgiveness and inclusion. And I give thanks to God for all the ways you are like Bartimaeus, how you see the truth of Jesus’ way, and follow it, with your hearts open to the needs of the world. And as you shine with the brightness of God’s love, you reflect the beauty of God’s light in our world’s darkness. Thanks be to God. Amen.