

Rising from the Side of the Road

(Mark 10:46-52)

Sermon delivered by The Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost, October 28, 2018

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”¹

“Son of David, have mercy on me!”²

How often have you found yourself in a situation in which you feel like no matter how loudly you talk or how much you try to draw attention to yourself, you are not being heard? How often have you felt like you are being overlooked and ignored? How often have you felt, in the words of John the Baptist, that you are simply the voice of one crying out in the wilderness?

In today’s Gospel reading, this is the very thing confronting Bartimaeus. A solitary, blind beggar, sitting on the side of the well-traveled road running from Jericho to Jerusalem, he is ignored and silenced. Like every one of us, he was someone. He was important enough that the writer of Mark, alone among the Gospels, names him – and, more than that, shares his lineage: son of Timaeus. Despite being named, however, despite being given a heritage, what do we find?

A man desperate to be remembered, he is instead one others are anxious to forget.

The crowd following Jesus on this particular day was on its way to the annual celebration of Passover, the remembrance of the time when God, through Moses, led the Jewish people to freedom from the bonds of slavery in Egypt. What is ironic here is that, in their enthusiasm to celebrate their own freedom, these pilgrims were quick to ignore one who was experiencing his own bonds – ones created out of blindness and poverty.

Some may have glanced in his direction as they walked by before quickly looking away. Many others might have made a point of moving to the far side of the road so that they didn’t have to acknowledge him – the “out of sight, out of mind” response. And I wonder about the actions of Jesus’ own disciples – those he personally called to share God’s love and the hope of healing with the greater world. Did they hear him and try to silence him? Did they hear him and ignore him? Or were they perhaps so engrossed in gleaning every morsel of wisdom and knowledge that Jesus shared with them that they didn’t even see him – a display of their own blindness to the situation?

¹ Mark 10:47 (NRSV).

² Mark 10:48 (NRSV).

So how did that feel for Bartimaeus? If you think about the times when we share the peace in this space, the conversation quickly fills up the room and it is sometimes hard to hear the person standing right next to you. So you can imagine, then, what it was like for this one man trying to make himself heard above the crowd following Jesus. Keep in mind there were not just a few dozen folks making the trek to Jerusalem with Jesus. This was a **large** crowd. According to the original Greek, it was a **considerable** crowd.

Now even with all of the details we find in this narrative, there is a lot left to our imagination. I sometimes think that is one of the beautiful things about the Gospels, something that I have talked about in the past: there is just enough there to tell us the story and give clues to the deeper message. But there are also spots where it is left to us to fill in the blanks. This is one of those times when my imagination kicks in. At the moment Bartimaeus is acknowledged by Jesus, I see something powerful take place that is not recorded: I see Jesus stop walking, turn to look at Bartimaeus, raise his hand, and quiet the crowd.

And in that briefest moment of silence, Bartimaeus hears clearly the voice of the one calling him from life in the margins to a new life with God. He hears the voice of the one who is choosing.

“Call ... **him**.”

For perhaps the first time in his life, he is not the one being silenced for the benefit of others. In **this** moment, Bartimaeus finally knows what it feels like to be acknowledged for what he truly is: a beloved child of God. But more than that, more than being called to that moment when he receives sight, I think that being called had another major impact on Bartimaeus. As a result of his healing and his instantaneous decision to follow Jesus on the way, to join the crowd of believers, he found that he was no longer alone. For you see, his blindness did not just remove his ability to **visually** connect with the world; it robbed him of the opportunity to **personally** connect with those around him.

Loneliness and blindness were themes explored by the priest and writer Henri Nouwen. For Nouwen, there are two types of each. There is the loneliness whereby we are out of touch with God and are anxious to find something that gives us a sense of belonging, intimacy, and home. The other comes from “an intimacy with God that is deeper and greater than our feelings and thoughts can capture.”³ As Nouwen writes, “We might think of these two kinds of loneliness as two forms of blindness. The first blindness comes from the absence of light, the second from too much light. The first loneliness we must try to outgrow with faith and hope. The second we must be willing to embrace in love.”⁴

³ Henri Nouwen, “Two Kinds of Loneliness.” <https://henrinouwen.org/meditation/two-kinds-loneliness/>.

⁴ Ibid.

So what are we left with? At its core, we are confronted simply by this: a man who **could not** see and a crowd that **would not** see.

Over the past several days, there have been unspeakable acts of violence that we **cannot** turn away from. They are events that we have no choice **but** to see. Two people – one man, one woman, both black – doing something as mundane as grocery shopping, shot dead in Kentucky. Eleven members of a Pittsburgh synagogue gathered together to celebrate the Sabbath, shot dead as they prayed. There are the things that sadly in today's world we **must** see.

Jesus, son of David, have mercy on them. Son of David, have mercy on them.

Now for many there are areas of blindness in life. For some of us, those blind spots are faulty and broken relationships with others. For others, it is a sense of financial blindness – a fear that we are on the edge of a cliff, and that just one significant event will push us over into the abyss of poverty. For still others, that blindness may come in the form of not seeing God at work in their lives – spending so much time looking for the big miracle, the big deliverance, that they miss the many small but equally important miracles taking place every day.

There have been times in my life when I was prideful enough – yes, I'll say it: **arrogant** enough – to think that the problems in my life were ones I could fix myself. Not enough money in the bank? I'll just work twice as hard to earn more. A problem in a relationship with a friend or family member? I'll just work twice as hard to rebuild the bridge – to be the fixer.

But despite thinking we can do it all, we simply **cannot**. No amount of hard work or working to be the fixer will ever help us or anyone else get out of it alone. No, to find our way out of these pitfalls in life, we need what Bartimaeus had: faith. And he did not act alone; he handed his problems over to God.

And as a result of that one act, Bartimaeus was healed. With a simple statement to Jesus, rooted in **his** faith – “My teacher, I want to see again” – his sight is restored. The wall separating him from others is torn down. As Craig Evans writes, he has “been transformed from a helpless man who was going nowhere to a restored man who sets out on the road of discipleship.”⁵

There may be times when it will be easy for us to be the crowd, focusing on ourselves and what we want and making everyone else take a back seat. Many of us will have moments in our lives when we are Bartimaeus – times when we sit, blind and broken, on the side of the road, waiting for someone to help.

And there will be times when we can be like Christ, reaching out our hand to call others ... to comfort others ... to celebrate and mourn with them.

⁵ Craig Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20, Volume 34B*.

We do not have to wait.

We do not have to worry.

We do not have to wonder.

We only need to trust – to ask – to receive.

“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.”

“Son of David, have mercy on me.”

Amen.