

“The Prayer of Bartimaeus”

Mark 10:46-52 – First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest – August 22, 2021

I know that many of you listening this morning have taken the train downtown each weekday and then walked to work. Maybe you down Adams; maybe you walked down Madison or Monroe. They were all great presidents. But as you walked through one of the greatest and most beautiful cities in America—and for that matter, the world—I bet you passed by many homeless people, begging by the street, some of them with all their earthly possessions gathered in garbage bags beside them.

And each day, as you walked to work, you may have come to recognize and even speak to the same homeless people begging on the same section of sidewalk. Perhaps you put a dollar in their cup. And over time, perhaps—just perhaps—you began to call them by their name.

I

This summer we’ve been studying the prayers of the Bible as a way of equipping us to be “pray-ers” ourselves: starting with the Old Testament and ending with the New. Today we turn to the story of Bartimaeus, a story found in all three Synoptic Gospels but most likely captured in its original form in Mark. It is a story of a blind man, and it is the final story of healing before Jesus walks up the road to Jerusalem to embrace in the Cross the healing of us all.

The narrative states that Jesus and his followers came to Jericho—a city of victory for the Jewish People, where Joshua “Fit the Battle of Jericho, and the walls came tumblin’ down.” But now, in these latter days of oppression and defeat, with a Roman Occupier and a fraudulent, puppet-king, the companions of Jesus find no brass bands but only a beggar sitting by the roadside, a blind man named Bartimaeus, begging for alms.

It is significant that we’re given the blind man’s name—his full name—Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus. The name itself is a peculiar hybrid of Hebrew and Greek, perhaps reflective of a gospel meant to include both Jew and Gentile believers. But what is truly significant is that this man is known: his is no outsider. He is part of the community of Jericho, no less than the homeless men and women we encounter on the streets of Chicago as we go to work each morning. They are a part of our community. They have fathers and mothers. They are our neighbors. And they all have a name.

II

Jesus had made a name for himself as a teacher, preacher and healer by the time he came to Jericho. Earlier in the 10th chapter of Mark, we are given a story about a man who ran up and knelt before him, asking, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” The man is

probably a Pharisee—a wealthy Pharisee—and he addresses Jesus not as “Rabbi” but as “Didaskale”—which was not necessarily a title of respect. The addition of “Good” before it may even have been construed as condescending, like people who say to me, “Hey Rev!” after a couple of drinks at a wedding reception. It’s not meant to be “reverential,” which is probably why Jesus responded to the young man, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” The same holds true for reverence toward God—which is why I prefer “Hey you!” more than “Hey Rev!”

So the “Rich Young Ruler,” as he is now called, asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” His focus is on himself—not Jesus. And it is clear that he does not see him for who he truly is: the Lord, the Messiah; Son of David and Son of God. “What must I do?” he asks. And Jesus quotes him the Ten Commandments, to which he responds, “I have kept them all.”

Wow. By now, we must all be thinking, “This guy is super-religious. All ten? And all the time?” But Jesus sees into us more deeply than that. The text says, and “Jesus, looking at him, loved him. “You lack one thing,” he says, something clearly of more importance than righteousness by works. “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor...and then come, follow me.” Jesus was calling him to become his disciple by freeing him from servitude to his own possessions, which were many. But the Rich Young Ruler wasn’t willing to do that. He did not “see” who Jesus truly was-and is. The “one thing” he lacked—was FAITH.

III

“Faith is the sight of the inward eye,” said Andrew Maclaren. The Rich Young Ruler couldn’t “see” Jesus. But not Bartimaeus. Blind Bartimaeus saw very clearly indeed. When he heard that Jesus of Nazareth had come to town, he began to shout, saying, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

He called him “Son of David,” a Messianic title never-before used in Mark’s Gospel. And never repeated until the Centurion said, “Truly this man was the Son of God.” In Caesarea Philippi, Peter had told Jesus privately, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” But Bartimaeus’ confession is public. “Jesus! Son of David!” And it is dangerous as well. So the crowd tries to shush him. But poor Bartimaeus only shouts out louder, “Son of David! Have mercy on me!”

Today, these words are known as “The Jesus Prayer,” and they form the foundation of what it means to place faith in Christ.

- The Rich Young Ruler’s focus is solely on himself.
- The poor blind beggar’s focus is solely on Jesus.
- The Rich Young Ruler says, “What must I do?”
- The poor blind beggar says, “Have mercy on me.”

Who is really blind here? And who is truly poor?

The narrative states that Jesus, when he heard him, stopped walking. “Call him here,” he said. And with short, powerful imperatives they did so: “Take heart. Get up. He’s calling.”

The language is present-tense, which suggests these words may be meant for us as well. “Take courage. Stand up. Jesus is calling—you.”

So the blind man leaps up and makes his way to Jesus, walking by faith and not by sight. But the Rich Young Ruler walked away, imprisoned by his own possessions. Poor Bartimaeus threw off everything he had: his tattered cloak. “What do you want me to do for you?” asked Jesus. And the blind man, addressing Jesus with respect, using the same title that Mary Magdalene used on Easter Morning, says, “Rabboni,” “My Teacher,” “Rabboni—let me see again.”

You’ve all heard of the gift of second sight, but clearly, Blind Bartimaeus already had that, for he knew who Jesus was and what he had come to accomplish: the salvation of his people. When asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” he could have asked for money. But now he asks to see. And when Jesus answers his prayer, what does he see? He sees Jesus, and unlike the Rich Young Ruler, he follows him “on the way.”

“I am the Way,” said Jesus. “I am Truth.” And “I am Life.” And like poor, blind Bartimaeus, maybe we all today must keep on learning to “walk by faith and not by sight?” Because otherwise, all we may ever see is the illusion of the saving power of what we think we possess, and we will miss out on the opportunity to be “rich toward God.”

“Have mercy on me,” said the blind man.

“Call him here,” said Jesus.

“Your faith has made you well.”

Conclusion

Speaking of possessions, Founding Father Patrick Henry said, “My most cherished possession I wish I could give you is my faith in Jesus Christ, for with him and nothing else you can be happy, but without him and with all else you’ll never be happy.”

So let me ask you, if our Risen Lord asked you today, “What do you want me to do for you?” do you know what your answer would be?

- Hannah wanted a child of her own.
- King David wanted a clean heart.
- The Leper wanted to give our Lord thanks.

- King Solomon wanted wisdom.
- The father wanted his son to be healed.

And blind Bartimaeus? Blind Bartimaeus wanted to see. The Lord of Mercy opened his eyes.
But Bartimaeus already could see, couldn't he?

May the Lord give us such vision, and may God bless us with such faith,
that we, too, may pray with such humility of spirit:

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

Amen.

-Rev. Clinton G. Roberts