

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, February 25, 2024

On this second Sunday in Lent, we will return to The Narrative Lectionary. I hope that you were here last week to hear Dr. Catherine Meeks preach. If you weren't, we really encourage you to go on Livestream on the website and check out not only her sermon but also the formation class that we had in Montgomery Hall together. It was powerful. It was an important word for us to hear together. We were with her in the Gospel of John last week; and this week we return to the Gospel of Mark, which will carry us through this liturgical season together. We'll read from the 46th through the 52nd verse of Mark 10, but before we read scripture together, let us join our hearts in prayer. Let us pray.

Good and gracious Spirit, fall fresh upon us this day. Fall fresh and quiet us, that we might hear your word for us, and that in hearing we might respond. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

Beginning in the 46th verse—

They came to Jericho, and as he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me.” 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.” So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.” Jesus said to him, “Go. Your faith has made you well.” Immediately, he regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So, first an interesting tidbit for us of information about this text. This is one of only two times in the Gospel of Mark when the one who Jesus will heal is named. Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus. This is important. We know that naming in scripture is very important on its own, but more particularly for the Gospel of Mark. It informs how we understand Bartimaeus's plight. He has a family. He's a known commodity. So then the question that should be on our minds to begin with is why is he sitting by the gate of Jericho? Why is he having to beg when he has people that he is connected to, that brought him into the world and are called to love and care for him? We don't know the answer, but what we do know is that he is not at his family home. He is by the gate when this procession begins, first into the city of Jericho, and then without much explanation of what happens in the city, then out of the city of Jericho. Jesus has begun in his ministry to gain some notoriety, some steam, in this thing called sharing the good news; and people are beginning to follow him so that the group isn't just a few disciples. It's gathering. You can imagine there's some energy. You might imagine that the blind man sitting there at the gate would look up when he began to hear all the footsteps and the commotion and say, “Who are y'all walking with?” And somebody, maybe just throwing away a line, says, “Jesus of Nazareth.” And something in that identity draws forth from Bartimaeus something new, a sort of deep desire

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that takes the form of words. “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” Son of David—wow. They said of Nazareth. Yet Bartimaeus knows Jesus is indeed the one who is to come, the one that will bring healing and wholeness and a brand new world. “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.”

Here's what I want us to pay attention to. The beginning of this text, verse 48. “Many sternly ordered him to be quiet.” Sometimes when people are crying for the help of the Lord, even those who claim to be following in the ways of Jesus try to silence them. “Be quiet; don't bother him.” They'd probably heard Bartimaeus begging for years. They know his voice well. “Don't embarrass us right now, Bartimaeus; we just hosted this Jesus in our town, and now we're leaving together. Just be quiet for a few more minutes. The whole procession will be by you.” But that doesn't scare Bartimaeus. In fact, it emboldens him. Even louder, he says, “Son of David, have mercy on me.” And at this Jesus is frozen in his tracks, and he says, “Bring him to me.” And you can imagine these same people who are walking in the crowd, who've just said “be quiet, he doesn't need to hear from you” now have to go back to him and say, “Take heart, get up, he is calling you.” They have just been trying to silence him, and now they have to feign compassion for him. “Get up; he is calling you.” What I love is that even as a blind man Bartimaeus, scripture tells us, sprang up and made his way to Jesus. I wonder if someone was kind enough to give him an arm and move him in Jesus's direction. I wonder if he had to, through the crowd as it parted, he had to kind of make his way just toward the sound of Jesus's voice, or where he had last heard Jesus's voice. Scripture doesn't tell us, but what it does say is that he came to Jesus, and when he came to Jesus, Jesus asked him a question that changed his life. Depending on how long we get to tread the Earth, there's only a handful of questions that we get asked in our life that will change it. If you are married or soon to be married, and then you have asked a question and received...or received a question. You...you've asked a question and received one. Will you marry me? Perhaps it was romantic, or perhaps it just blurted out. Maybe you planned a long time on how you were going to ask it. Maybe you knew it was coming. It'll change the direction of the life that you will live. For others in different seasons of life, the question might be, “Did you get into the school that you want to go to? Are you going to take that job that's going to move you away from here? Are you ready for hospice?” There's only a handful of questions that we get asked in our lives that change them. Jesus, when he has Bartimaeus come really close, you can imagine he says it loud enough for everyone to hear. “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus knows because he's just watched Bartimaeus. However he, however Bartimaeus got to him, he's just watched it happen. Jesus knows him fully anyway, knows that he's blind but if he's somehow forgotten that, he sees him coming toward him. He knows what his deepest need is, and yet he asks for everyone to hear, “What do you want me to do for you?” The man says to Jesus, “My teacher(or rabboni) “Let me see again. Let me catch a vision again.” And immediately, scripture says, he regains his sight. He regains that which has been lost, which...which has pushed him into begging just to subsist in the world; and Jesus says to him, “Go, your faith has made you well.” I wonder, as Presbyterians who stay in our minds a whole lot, I wonder if we've ever asked the question as a question truly of the heart. What do you want Jesus to do for you? Some of you know what your answer would be. Your answer would be just as immediate as the answer of Bartimaeus. “I want my child to be okay. I

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want my friend to live longer than the diagnosis says they will. I want to find work that feeds my soul. I want to feel God's presence again in my life. I want to stay sober." Maybe y'all know the answer to that question. "What do you want Jesus to do for you," but if you don't know that, this is the perfect season for you. This second Sunday in Lent marks for us about a third of the way on this Lenten journey. It is many things—this Lenten season, but perhaps chief amongst them, it is a time to ask questions, to contemplate that which is deepest within our souls. Last week we got an important question from Jesus through the preaching of Dr. Meeks. "Do you want to be made well? Do you want to be healed?" And today Jesus asks Bartimaeus and you, "What do you want Jesus to do for you?" If that sounds self-centered, I would understand that judgment, but I would invite you to lean into it, actually. Most all of our great teachers tell us that we have to search for the answers within the personal before it can become communal, that we have to look at the particular before it can become universal. And so before we can really move outward into what it is that Jesus wants in the world, we actually have to first contemplate the question of what it is we desire Jesus to do for us, each of us. Maybe you don't know. Maybe you've made it a pattern to show up on a Sunday morning at 8:30 or 11:00, but some time long ago you stopped asking what it was Jesus was desiring to do in your life and what it was that you were desiring Jesus to do in your life. And if that's the case, then this season is perfect for you. And here's a pro tip. If you don't have a deep desire, it is okay for us to borrow from Bartimaeus. It is okay for us to ask of our Savior, "Let me see again. Give me eyes that are fresh to catch a vision of what you are doing in my life, in my church, in our city, in my marriage, in that friendship, amongst classmates, in that cubicle at work, or on the other side of that computer screen. Give me fresh eyes to capture a vision for the world that you desire to make new." What I imagine is that when you begin to truly sit with the question of what it is you desire Christ to do in your life, there will be voices within you that say "that doesn't rise to the level of Jesus's concern." Ignore that answer and move on to another one." Be quiet, vulnerability, fear, scarcity." Jesus doesn't need to hear that from you. What I want you to do is lean into it. If the question makes you feel most vulnerable, perhaps you need to say it again and even more loudly. "Have mercy on me, oh Christ." And that's the beautiful thing about this text. For Bartimaeus the healing is immediate. He's already hopped up even as a blind man. He's left his cloak. He's gone to Jesus, but then when Jesus says the word, he sees again. That might not be the truth for you. In fact, it...it probably won't happen like that for you, but the story isn't about expediency. It's not about the pace with which transformation takes place. What it is about is that there are only two ingredients necessary in this story the Gospel tells us, and that is the faith of Bartimaeus and the mercy of God—the faith of Bartimaeus and the mercy of Jesus, the Christ.

So I wonder if you might rise from the mat you find yourself lying on today. You might approach Jesus and you might hear afresh, "What is it that you want me to do for you?" You might sit with and ponder that question in this season of Lent in a serious way, that in that pondering you might be reconnected to a faith that believes in healing and that calls us to follow. After Bartimaeus is healed and given sight once again, the text leaves us with simply saying, "Immediately Bartimaeus regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way." May you have the faith, may we have the faith to ask what it is we desire of Christ, what it is we desire for Christ to do in our lives, and then may we follow.

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.