

Bartimaeus

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Jesus and his disciples came to Jericho. 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 out 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 him on the way. - Mark 10:46-52

"What do you want me to do for you?"

Jesus asks the question at a critical moment in today's gospel story from Mark.

"What do you want me to do for you?"

Because the man who is being asked is blind, and because we know where the story goes, Jesus' question may seem merely rhetorical. But notice that in addition to being blind, Bartimaeus is also a beggar. And some beggars get what they want and need by making loud and awkward scenes. Maybe Bartimaeus was "*one of those*." And maybe Jesus was genuinely wondering if Bartimaeus was only after money.

Some of us here may even imagine, relative to our own poverty, of whatever sort, that money is always the answer. "*If only I'd won the Mega Millions jackpot, I wouldn't have any more problems.*" Right? But winning may have only assured our ongoing blindness to our deeper needs and desires. One of today's appointed readings for Morning Prayer gives this eerie caution: "*Do not revel in great luxury or you may become impoverished by its expense.*" (Sirach 18:32)

So, the question of Jesus to Bartimaeus, and his question to us, may be more nuanced: What do you *really* want me to do for you? Is it just about money for you? Or is there something more?

Regarding this moment in the story, Bible scholar Leonard Vander Zee observes that "*here, and in other similar situations, Jesus wants more than to be on call for emergency medical requests. He wants a conversation, a relationship. In our human cry for mercy, Jesus asks us to articulate the real need, the real desire. And the answer to that question is not always immediately apparent.*" ¹

The answer to that question is not always immediately apparent. Some crowd or another often gets in *our* way. The crowd shames us. The crowd pressures us to conform. The crowd questions our judgment. The crowd threatens us. In our time of smartphones we're over-crowded with too much information. And already we were contending with our personal crowds of inner voices that fear change, that urge us keep playing the same self-defeating roles, to be 'nice,' lay low and never make a scene.

Adverse crowds are nothing new. Imagine the sarcastic crowd that must have taunted Noah for building such a crazy big boat so far from any water. Or the crowds that often railed against Moses in the wilderness. Or the bloodthirsty crowd that gathered only a week or so after today's gospel story, shouting 'Crucify! Crucify!' What crowds have kept you in line, silenced and still blind?

In the case of Bartimaeus: *"Many sternly ordered him to be quiet ..."* And he might have complied, shut up, stayed seated. But no! *"... he cried out even more loudly..."* In the Greek text it's *Eleison!* (ἐλέησον), the plea with which we ourselves begin the mass: *"have mercy on me!"* Maybe Bartimaeus knew the wisdom of a friend who once said that *'propriety is one of the greatest enemies of the gospel.'* He will not let propriety and the crowd get in the way of his heart's desire. His example may lead us to remember with gratitude some break out moment of our own ... Or perhaps his example will encourage us to plead our case directly to Jesus or to make a scene for the sake of good.

One Ascension member who was recently asked to review and respond to a draft of our parish budget for next year wondered aloud, with what seemed to be a shaking but courageous voice, *"Why is it that we have almost \$150,000 budgeted for music but only about \$500 dollars for Christian education? What does that say about us? The way things are going, in 20 years we'll have a fine professional choir singing to two people in the pews."* I didn't hear the question as an attack on our musicians or our music ministry *per se*. Rather, I heard it as an attempt to break through the crowd noises of our business-as-usual assumptions. It seemed to be about how and where we are making genuine contact with Jesus, if at all, *other than* through music.

But back to today's gospel story. Notice that the crowd loses its power and recedes when Bartimaeus ignores or overcomes it at the invitation of Jesus. The focus in the story narrows down to the personal encounter with Christ that I already described. And then the question of Jesus: *"What do you want me to do for you?"*

"My Teacher, I want to see again." The term with which Bartimaeus addresses Jesus, *rabboni* (ῥαββουνί) is found only twice in the gospels, here and when Mary Magdalene recognizes Jesus at the tomb on the morning of his resurrection. It's a familiar, even intimate, form of address, not one normally used upon first meeting someone. But we've already seen what Bartimaeus thought of propriety. Leonard Vander Zee writes, *"It's as though for Bartimaeus this was the encounter he had been waiting for all his life ..."* ¹

Notice also that Bartimaeus wants to *"see again."* Apparently, Bartimaeus was once able to see but somehow, somewhere along the way, slowly or suddenly, he lost his sight. And we may rightly ask about the ways that we ourselves have lost our vision, lost sight of what's most important, lost our ability to find our way forward.

Notice that after healing him, Jesus says to Bartimaeus, *"Go ..."* but instead Bartimaeus *"followed him on the way."* How could he not? And what about us?

As he asked Bartimaeus, Jesus is still asking us: *What do you want me to do for you? Or: What do you really want me to do for you?*

¹Online source: Center for Excellence in Preaching, Proper 25B, 2018