

“Too Proud to Beg?”
Job 42:1-6, 10-12a Mark 10:46-52

There was a real sense of momentum and anticipation as Jesus left Jericho. It was not far from there to Jerusalem, only about fifteen miles, so as the disciples' expectations grew as they saw the crowd swell in size there was the sense all around them that something great was going to happen.

Recently we treated ourselves to a concert in Tampa at the Performing Arts Center. I had never been there before. We were going to see Leonard Cohn; for those not familiar with him he was a recognized poet before becoming a very popular musician, performer, and recording star back in the 60's. He is in his mid-76 now and his voice has gotten deeper and his sense of humor is incredibly sharp and wry. We found our way to the parking garage, got parked and were walking to the theater by an elevated walkway. At one point there was a street musician playing saxophone, quite well, I thought so I fished out a dollar to put in his case.

The concert was incredible in many ways. One particular song stuck in my mind called “Waiting for a Miracle.” The lyrics go in part,
 When you've fallen
 on the highway
 and you're lying
 in the rain,
 and they ask you
 how you're doing
 of course you'll say
 you can't complain --
 If you're squeezed
 for information,
 that's when you've got to
 play it dumb:
 You just say
 you're out there waiting
 for the miracle,
 for the miracle to come

Those lyrics came to mind when I was praying about this blind beggar sitting on the road leading from Jericho to Jerusalem. On the way back to the car after the concert the same saxophone player was still there playing in the walkway. My first thought was, “I gave him a dollar on the way in.” My second thought was, “I need to give him another dollar.” So I did as we passed by. I don't know his name, never really thought about it. We usually don't think of beggars having a name.

Earlier this year many you know that over in Bradenton a new One Stop Center opened to help coordinate services to the homeless of Manatee County. I had taken a tour with some other United Methodist Clergy right before it opened. Very impressive facilities that includes Our Daily Bread that provides a hot meal every day to hungry people here in Manatee County who are hungry enough that they are not too proud to stand in line.

I was thinking about how nice everything looked, wondering about what it was really like so one day this summer I decided to get another perspective on it. I put on some old bluejean shorts, old sneakers, a t-shirt. I decided to not take my wallet so I left all my credit cards behind, taking just my driver's license, cell phone, and \$5 and walked across the green bridge down past McKetchnie Field, just past Popi's One, and turned left. It was harder than I thought it would be.

I know it was just kind of a preacher stunt; I felt like an imposter, but I had to let go of a lot of pride to walk up there. There weren't many signs about where to go or what to do; I just followed where everyone else was going. I'm not quite sure how to describe the experience. There was much more energy there than I would have guessed, but it was a different kind of energy; there were people of all ages, including many children; everything seemed very efficient; the food was OK, even had a little salad. There was a very clear line between those serving and those being served. There was a friendliness across that line, no animosity but the line was still there.

I left with more questions and I hope more humility and more courage than when I came. If you asked most of those people there that day how they were doing I am sure their first response would have been like LC's song, "Oh, can't complain" yet if you took the time to press them perhaps they also would reply, "We are waiting for a miracle."

Tim read the Old Testament passage from the end of Job. We know all the losses that Job had experienced; being able to stand in line at a soup kitchen would have been a blessing for him but in verse 5 he is speaking to YHWH and expresses his miracle in the midst of all his travail, "I had heard of you by seeing of hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you." Job's miracle was the humble realization of the presence of God."

A blind Bartimaeus sat by the side of the road he began to hear all of the commotion approaching. He had obviously heard about Jesus of Nazareth, his hearing was made more acute by the loss of his sight, so he had a pretty good intuitive idea of the uniqueness of this man named Jesus who was approaching. Mark tells this story very carefully. Perhaps we also need to listen as carefully as Bartimaeus. It is tempting to hear it as just one more example of Jesus' compassion and healing powers and rush past it as quickly as a man playing saxophone on the sidewalk.

This is the last healing that Jesus performs before entering Jerusalem. When Jesus first set out for Jerusalem back in Mark 8:22-26 he began with the healing of another blind man. That was when he struggled a bit with the healing by spitting and using his saliva to rub on the man's eyes, but we know this blind beggar's name, not only his name Bartimaeus but Mark explicitly wants us to know that he is the son of Timaeus, which is Honor in Aramaic. So this blind beggar is named "The Son of Honor" and he calls out, "Jesus, Son of David." One Son calling out to another Son, in a very public way, no timidity here. Two names with great expectations attached to both of them. Our translations don't quite capture the fullness of what Bartimaeus is saying here. Rather than just a plea for mercy from Jesus, Bartimaeus is boldly asking that Jesus actually do something for him.

"Many" saw this plea by Bartimaeus as just a distraction and interruption. Jesus is dealing with more than one kind of blindness here. There is the physical blindness of Bartimaeus, but there is the even more troubling spiritual blindness of those closest to Jesus. It was just earlier in this same chapter that the disciples "sternly" tried to prevent people from bringing children to Jesus. Then there was the man, we aren't told his name; he is only described as rich, yet his wealth serves only to blind him to the presence of the kingdom and he cannot or will not divest himself of those jewel encrusted blinders.

Then right before this story is where James and John come to Jesus in private with a special request for places of privilege when Jesus comes into his kingdom. This Bartimaeus episode emphasizes all the ways that Jesus confronts the more significant spiritual blindness of his closest followers who just do not seem able to be grasped by the heart of Jesus mission. This can be a useful cautionary tale for all of us who are quite comfortable being insiders and don't realize that our comfort can be a very pleasant blindness that often needs the roughness of outsiders to crack the shells in which we may not even realize we are blinded ourselves.

But in his stillness Jesus heard. In his stillness and out of his intimately nurtured sense of relationship Jesus used that same spiritually blind crowd. He didn't call Bartimaeus himself, he told that same "many" to call him for him, and just like that he flipped them, they did. One minute they are telling the guy to shut up and the next minute they are relaying Jesus call to him. I guess "the Many" will always act like "the many."

But in order to respond Bartimaeus had to do something very significant. He had to throw off his cloak, the most valuable thing he possessed, probably the only thing he possessed. It had kept him warm during frigid nights. In its pockets were the meager proceeds of his begging. It may not seem like much to us, but it was all he had. But responding to the call of Christ always asks us to leave something we value behind. It may be prepackaged values; it may be carefully

laid plans; it may be preconceived ideas. “Throwing off” and “letting go” is the heart of the spiritual journey.

So now very vulnerable without his cloak the Son of Honor was brought face to face with the Son of David, and one son asked the other son, “What do you want me to do for you?”

Remember, right before this, this is the same exact question Jesus had asked James and John when cornered by them. This request was not for privilege or prestige; it was not for power or a place of honor. Bartimaeus responded this time referring to Jesus as rabouni and asked that he would be able to see again. His request is a humble acknowledgment that there is something vital he has lost and that he needs not just the miracle of being able to see but also the miracle of being willing to be taught.

Jesus immediately places the miracle within the man’s faith. Your faith has made you well! Bartimaeus regained his sight and he could have gone anywhere he wanted. Jesus said, “Go”; he didn’t say where. He could have gone anywhere he wanted and done anything he wanted to do; he could see again and he could use his sight for any purpose he chose – all the shame and all the blame had been removed. It was gone.

He could have used his sight for any number of cunning purposes, and no one would blame him. He could have used his sight to cultivate some very nice places of comfort for himself, no shame there at all. But what Mark tells us is that Bartimaeus used his sight to follow Jesus. The newly sighted Son of Honor followed the Son of David to Jerusalem and saw all that happened there.

I believe that the real reason we know this formerly blind beggar by name is that he learned to see as Jesus sees; he learned to see with love. We have no reason to believe that Bartimaeus knew all that would happen in the next week of Jesus’ life. He would see the crowds; he would see all of the disciples desert Jesus, scattering like sheep without a shepherd. He would see Jesus die, and those who most thought that they were the ones who could see Jesus were the ones who would discover in his death that they really couldn’t see at all. He would see the disciples return to Galilee defeated but no longer blind. For in his death Jesus reveals our blindness, but in his resurrection Jesus gives to all who will see the good news of the closeness of God’s kingdom near us and within each of us by faith.

Are we willing to live with the courage of Bartimaeus? Are we willing to throw off our too comfortable security blankets? Are we willing to see with eyes of love? Are we willing to be willing to follow Jesus on the way? In his stillness Jesus is calling your name today.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

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