

Big Faith

Mark 10:46-52

Introduction

I heard a story this week about a woman who badly needed cataract surgery. She had known this surgery was needed for some time, but the thought of anyone doing anything to her eyes made her very fearful. After all, she thought, "Even though I can't see as well as I used to, I can still see well enough to do most of the things I want to." So she kept putting the surgery off until finally one day her vision got bad enough, so she reluctantly underwent the procedure.

A few weeks later one of her friends checked in with her to see how the surgery had gone. The woman's response was unexpected:

"Well," she said with more than just a bit of disgust in her voice, "I want you to know that surgery was quite a disappointing wake up call for me."

"Why, what happened?" the friend asked.

"As you know, I have this beautiful brown dress that I love to wear. You've seen it. It matches my eyes, and fits me to a T. I have always thought I looked beautiful in that dress, so I would wear it every chance I had."

"Well," she went on, "when I got home from my surgery, I discovered that dress is not brown after all! It's green! And I hate green!"

Seeing things as they really are can sometimes create problems. Some people choose to see only what they want to see; but other people, especially those who have been without their physical sight for a significant period of time, usually prefer to see clearly again. Such was the case of a man named Bartimaeus, the central figure in today's Gospel text.

Now if you will permit me to keep that sight-related vocabulary flowing... in this series of sermons we are "looking" at the ways in which the coming Kingdom of Christ differs from the kingdom of this world. "We want to see" what life in that kingdom is like so we can learn to live as good citizens of that Kingdom. Today a blind man named Bartimaeus will help us focus on that truth.

Let me set the scene of today's Gospel story. If you have ever been in a Bible study with me, you have no doubt heard me talk about the context of the passage many, many times. My question is always "Where do the words you are reading fit into the overall Biblical story?"

The words of this text are the final words in Mark chapter 10. The first words of Mark chapter 11 are Mark's description of the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem – that is, the beginning of the final week of the life of Jesus.

- As this today's story begins, Jesus is leaving Jericho to make the 15 mile journey to Jerusalem. That means, in today's text, He is less than a week away from His crucifixion.

- Walking with Him on this road to Jerusalem, are His disciples “together with a large crowd.”

As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city... (Mark 10:46)

This crowd of people would have been a very large group, all traveling together to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, one of the major Jewish festivals. Attendance at Passover was mandatory for every Jewish male, so there was always a large crowd along this road as Passover drew near. This large crowd, however, had an additional item on their agenda – one beyond the Passover celebration.

Just a few verses before our story in this 10th chapter of Mark, Jesus had given His listeners a very clear picture about what the next several days would hold for Him. He said:

We are going to Jerusalem, where I will be handed over to the ruling priests and religious scholars and they will condemn me to death and hand me over to the Romans. And they will mock me, spit in my face, torture me, and kill me, but three days later I will rise again. (Mark 10:33-34)

It was that teaching that prompted James and John in last week's Gospel to put in their bid for the two best seats in the new Jesus administration once He overthrew Rome and re-established Israel as the dominant political power.

- And it is that same teaching that had this crowd all energized about getting to Jerusalem, too. These are the people that will come parading into town shouting “Hosanna! Blessed is He that comes in the Name of the Lord!”
- The disciples and this large crowd all thought that the long awaited revolution was about to begin...even though Jesus clearly said He was going to Jerusalem to die.

They only saw what they wanted to see.

- On the one hand we have a group of people who can physically see, but who only see what they want to see.
- On the other hand we have Bartimaeus, a man who is unable to see physically, but who despite his physical limitations can see clearly who Jesus is.

And the story leaves us wondering ... Who is really blind?

Now if we were to jump ahead to the end of the story, we would see that

- Bartimaeus gets his physical sight back.
- But the disciples and the large crowd continue to be blind.

So why? Why is Bartimaeus the only one who is able to see? What happens with Bartimaeus that doesn't happen to the crowd?

#1: BARTIMAEUS CRIED OUT FOR MERCY

Look at verse 47:

When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Mark 10:47)

Mercy is the cry of people who have reached the end of their ropes. Resources and options are used up. When I am in need of mercy, there is nothing I can do to change my situation. And I know it.

The writer of Psalm 130 expressed it like this:

Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord; Lord, hear my voice.
Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. (Psalm 130:1-2)

When George H. W. Bush was Vice-President, he represented the United States at the funeral of former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. Afterwards Bush told about how he was deeply moved by a silent protest carried out by Brezhnev's widow at the end of the service. She stood motionless by her husband's coffin until seconds before it was closed. Then, just as the soldiers touched the lid, Brezhnev's wife performed an act of great courage and hope, a gesture that must surely rank as one of the most profound acts of civil disobedience ever committed. She reached down inside that casket and made the sign of the cross on her husband's chest. There in the citadel of secular, atheistic power, the wife of the man who had run that nation stopped to pray for her husband's soul. She believed there was another life, and that that life was best represented by Jesus who died on the cross. And in that solemn moment, she asked that Jesus might yet have mercy on her husband.

Look at this cry one more time:

When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Mark 10:47)

What Bartimaeus HEARD was that Jesus of Nazareth was coming. But he cried out to "Jesus, Son of David."

- The crowd was following Jesus of Nazareth. Their hopes were pinned on a man from an insignificant little town. "Nothing good comes from Nazareth" was the saying of the day. That's who they saw.
- But Bartimaeus, blind though he was, saw something else. Not a man from Nazareth, but the Messiah, Jesus the Son of David.

So he cried out "have mercy!" Only the Messiah could show Him mercy. The people in the crowd and hundreds like them could have pity on him. He had relied on their pity for years. A few coins here, a scrap of food there. He had gratefully received all the pity they could give him. But he was still blind.

Bartimaeus didn't need any more pity. He needed mercy.

So he cried out to the one who could give it to him. And when he cried out ...

#2: JESUS STOPPED FOR BARTIMAEUS

Verse 49:

Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." So they called to the blind man, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." (Mark 10:49)

Note the contrast: Jesus was walking with the crowd – or, better yet, they were walking with Him. But He stopped for Bartimaeus. There were two different agendas here. The crowd was walking. But Jesus was stopping.

Stopping was the last thing the crowd wanted. They wanted to get to Jerusalem. They wanted to march into the city and start the overthrow of the Roman government. They wanted to celebrate the arrival of the King of the Jews. They were ready for Palm Sunday.

- So when Bartimaeus started to cry out, the crowd did what people with agendas that opposed the agenda of Jesus always do. They told Bartimaeus to be quiet.

Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Mark 10:48)

- If you keep shouting, they said, Jesus will hear you and He will stop. We don't want Him to stop.

What the crowd could not see – despite their perfect 20/20 vision – was that at the top of the agenda of Jesus is always a stop for those who cry for mercy.

- The agenda of Jesus was to die on a cross so that all who cry to him for mercy might receive the forgiveness of their sins and find real life.
- The agenda of Jesus had nothing to do with the political agenda of the crowd.

Jesus is never drawn into the agendas of other people. But when people cry out to Jesus for mercy – that is His agenda – and He always stops and calls them to come.

#3: JESUS CALLS BARTIMAEUS

Verses 49-50:

Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." ... Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

And Bartimaeus came. In fact, he came quickly, jumping to his feet and throwing his long cumbersome cloak to the side. It would only slow him down.

APPLICATION

Bartimaeus was the only one healed that day. All the other travelers continued in their blindness.

- A day later they would shout Hosanna in anticipation of the victory they expected Jesus to bring.
- Five days later they would be shouting "Crucify Him" because Jesus do what they wanted him to do.

In this kingdom that is coming, we need a set of working spiritual eyes that are able to see what God is doing and wants to do in and around us. You can't see that with physical eyes. Physical eyes can only see what your heart wants to see. Like Bartimaeus, we have to cry out:

The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see." (Mark 10:51)

Lord, I want to see what you are doing in the hearts of those I love.

Lord, I want to see what you desire for my life.

Lord, I want to see what you are doing in the world around me.

Amen.