

What the Blind Man Wanted
Based on Mark 10:46-52
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The blind man is like the town crier on the road to Jerusalem. Though he's blind, or maybe because he's blind, he recognizes Jesus as the Son of David, the promised messiah, a person chosen by God to bring freedom, power, and wholeness back to the people of Israel. He knows who Jesus is. And what he knows, he shouts out for everyone to hear--Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me. Just last month, when I was in North Carolina, someone recommended this very sentence of the blind man to me, as a centering prayer, something we all might use that kind of says it all. You breathe in, they said, Jesus, Son of David, and you breathe out, have mercy on me. You breathe in the goodness, power, reality of who Jesus is, and you breathe everything about yourself that needs God's mercy, all those things that don't fit with who Jesus is. Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.

I'm probably a little stuck on prayer at the moment, but it seems to me the blind man in this story has a lot to say to us about prayer, about how we communicate with God.

The blind man calls out to Jesus, and Jesus calls him back. The blind man shouts out and Jesus hears him, across the crowd, across the space between them. But Jesus doesn't shout back. This reminds me a little of how my kids and I sometimes communicate. They're in their room, busy doing something of extremely important, and they shout out, "Mama!" Now I'm in the kitchen, downstairs from them, and I have a choice. I can shout back even louder, to be sure that they'll hear me, in which case they'll shout out what they want, and I'll have to shout back the answer. Or I can just ignore them and carry on with what I'm doing and wait for whatever it is to get urgent enough for them to come to me. I confess, usually I can't hold out against the repeated shouting, and I'll shout even louder than I have to, because I'm angry with them for making me shout--WHAT?

But Jesus, fortunately for us all, is not like me. Jesus doesn't shout at Bartimaeus across the crowd and the road and the noise, with an impatient--"WHAT?" Instead, he says to the people near him, "Tell him to come here." And then you can imagine this chain reaction--tell him Jesus is calling him, pass it on. Until the message gets through to Bartimaeus, who's probably still sitting there shouting, Jesus, Son of David. Alright already, they say, you got his attention. Take heart, get up, he's calling you. You're actually getting a response from him--and here we thought you were a blithering blind idiot, wasting your breath here shouting at the top of your lungs. But no, look, he actually wants to talk to you.

And when Bartimaeus gets close enough to talk, Jesus asks him, "What do you want?" Well, duh. I mean, here's a blind man, begging beside the road. What do you think he wants? But maybe Jesus just wants to hear Bartimaeus say it out loud. What do you want me to do for you? Jesus asks, and Bartimaeus surprisingly doesn't laugh or say, duh. He just very simply answers, "I want to be able to see." "Teacher, let me see

again.” He has no hesitation, he has no second thoughts. He knows what he wants, what he has wanted a long time—sight.

Last week we talked about Jesus saying “ask and you will receive” and that you have to ask first, in order to receive. And Bartimaeus is a perfect example of someone who asks, and then receives. Jesus surely knows what Bartimaeus wants, but he waits until Bartimaeus asks for it—Teacher, let me see again. And then Jesus tells him that his prayer to be healed has answered itself. “Your faith has made you well,” he says. The faith that we see when Bartimaeus shouts from the roadside, the faith that we see when he throws off his cloak and comes to Jesus, and the faith that we see when he asks Jesus in so many words for what he wants. That’s the faith that allows him to get what he wants. Ask and you will receive. If we can have the faith to search, have the faith to ask, then we will find; we will receive.

Bartimaeus’s prayer is to see, and it’s on the way to being answered even while he’s still praying it. Jesus is reaching out to him, calling to him, before Bartimaeus knows anything about it, while he’s still sitting there, a blind beggar by the road. He has been heard already, and because he’s been heard, he’s about to be healed. But he keeps on shouting out his prayer, Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me—even after it’s in the process of being answered.

We call out our woes, our needs, our prayers, but sometimes we’re so busy calling that we don’t realize our prayers are being answered. Sometimes we have to remind one another, nudge one another—shush, listen, don’t look now, but you’re getting a response. Sometimes it takes that chain reaction, that fire brigade passing the bucket on—tell him Jesus wants to talk to him, tell her Jesus is calling her...before that poor beggar at the end of the chain can get close enough to Jesus for the miracle to happen.

The miracle, then, is not just something that happens between Jesus and Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus depends on those other anonymous people; he depends on that crowd. If he didn’t have lots of other people, the whole miracle couldn’t have happened. First of all, someone must have told Bartimaeus that the person coming on the road was Jesus. He’s blind, after all, he can’t recognize Jesus or see what he’s doing. Not only does someone have to tell him that this is Jesus coming, someone had to have told him something at some point about who Jesus is. Otherwise, where is he getting the idea that Jesus can heal him? How does he know that Jesus is the Son of David? True, some of these nameless other people tell Bartimaeus to shut up when he does start shouting, but then, that probably just makes him shout louder. And then once Jesus summons him, Bartimaeus depends on some of these people to get the message to him, that in fact Jesus heard him and wants him to come closer. In short, Bartimaeus wouldn’t have called out, and wouldn’t have come when he was called, except that there were all these other people around helping him get the message.

In the process, these nameless other people have gotten a message themselves. First of all, they had to get the message that Jesus hears the pleas even of the lowest of the low; there is no one, however poor they may be, or however useless society may make them

feel, however useless they may feel themselves to be, there is no one whom Jesus will disregard; everyone is important enough to be heard and attended to by the Lord.

We need to take that very seriously. When we sang Kum Ba Yah at the session meeting—when we sing, “someone’s crying, Lord,” or “someone’s praying, Lord,” we need to hear those cries and prayers. No one crying out to the Lord should be told to shut up. No one who is hurting should be told to put their hurt on the shelf, to hide it where the rest of us won’t have to know.

Remember those cold medicine commercials where the person wakes up groggy and sick and they take Nyquil daytime or something and the next time you see them they’re dressed up and cheerful because the medicine has allowed them to mask the cold. And those commercials sell Nyquil because most people when they go to work have to pretend they feel fine, even when they feel really awful. We have to pretend we have energy even when we have nothing, pretend we have purpose and drive, even when we’re having trouble getting out of bed in the morning. Pretend we’re focused on work, even when we’re eaten up with worry about a family member or friend.

That’s work. For many people, work is a place where you have to look good, no matter how you feel. This is not work. This is your community and your family. This should be a safe place where we can come and celebrate our joys but also a safe place where we can come when we are broken, where it’s ok to be broken, to be in need and looking for healing.

That’s one thing that the people in the story, and we, learn from this miracle that happens to Bartimaeus. The other thing they learn, they learn from Bartimaeus. They learn from Bartimaeus who Jesus is. Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me, he says. And in this plea, this prayer, Bartimaeus recognizes who Jesus is and who he is himself, and what their relationship might be. Jesus is the messiah, the person full of God’s power, but also the person full of God’s mercy.

Bartimaeus is asking something for himself, but he’s also, unintentionally, telling everyone who Jesus is. What he says is a prayer, but it’s also a sermon, a gospel lesson—even while he’s a blind beggar, he’s an evangelist. He’s on the side of the road, covered up in his cloak, shouting out for anyone who has ears to hear, this is the Son of David, this is the messiah—he might care, even about a poor blind guy like me, he might have that much mercy in him. That’s who Jesus is.

Our faith is related—yours to mine to others whom we have not yet met. Whatever Bartimaeus has been told about Jesus, he shouts it out. And because he shouts it out, other people also hear about Jesus. And because he shouts it out, a miracle of healing happens, and that miracle creates more faith. My faith is not just mine. The faith in each of us, small or big, feeds the faith of each of us. Like Bartimaeus, even our cries of utter despair, even our deepest needs can preach the gospel to other people. I look forward to the day when we hear Jesus saying to this congregation, to the city of Philadelphia, and to the church universal: “Go and be healed--your faith has made you well.”