

***“Faith and Restoration”***

The story of Blind Bartimaeus is familiar to most of us who came through the whole Sunday School experience as children and youth. But that very familiarity may mean that we gloss over, or miss entirely, some of the important features of this account. I looked back and came to realize that I had not preached on this Gospel narrative in more than thirty years. So my own familiarity with some of the important features of the account was somewhat cloudy(?). So let me try this morning to reset our collective appreciation for what Mark is trying to tell us about this encounter between Jesus and this blind man.

As I was typing that last sentence my keyboard messed up (certainly this was not my doing!) and produced the phrase “this bland man.” Bartimaeus is anything but bland; indeed, he is one of the more interesting characters in the Bible, in spite of the fact that his story consumes less than 10 verses of the texts (I should note right there that Mark had no verse numbers; chapter and verse numbers were not used until 1560 with the Geneva Bible). So Bartimeaus does not have the narrative clout of Moses, or David, or the Apostle Peter. But his interaction with Jesus is illustrative for all those who want to understand what a true encounter with Jesus will entail.

Let me begin with his name. Mark introduces him into the narrative: ***“Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside.”*** The name, “Bartimaeus,” in Aramaic means “son of Timaeus,” so right off the bat we have (can we call it?) a problem. A more precise English translation ought to read *“Son of Timaeus, son of Timaeus, a blind beggar ...”* (unless his moniker was like that of the former UN General-Secretary Boutros Boutros-Ghali). Usually, when the authors of the Scriptures include a soupçon of information like this, it is there to help the reader pinpoint to whom the author is referring [for example, Mark tells us in the Passion narrative: ***“They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry Jesus’***

*cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.”* I have no idea who Alexander or Rufus are, just as I have idea who Timaeus was; but I bet Mark’s earliest readers did.]

The name, Timaeus, comes from the Greek word, τιμη (timay), which would be translated “highly prized.” Aside from that doubling of his name, everything else we know about Bartimaeus would indicate that he is any but “highly prized” — he is a “nobody” (but, as I have quoted Dick Sering repeatedly, “*In the Kingdom of God nobodies are somebodies...*”). He is a blind beggar, which makes him the near to lowest of the low on the social ladder (to be lower he would have had to be a widow). He is “*sitting by the roadside,*” which removed him from the city altogether, thus lessening the chances of his begging to be productive. He is so poor that he is apparently an embarrassment to the crowd around Jesus who “*sternly ordered him to be quiet.*” He thus shines out in sharp contrast to the personages in the accounts just before this: the Twelve as a whole who argue about their relative greatness, the rich man who wanted to know how to inherit the Kingdom, and James and John who wanted assured status in the Kingdom.

Unlike them, Bartimaeus wants one thing: “*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*” He doesn’t even specify what that would mean to him. To his credit, he is no dilettante; he won’t let go of the opportunity. When they try to quiet him, he cries out more ardently, “*Son of David, have mercy on me!*” How does he know Jesus as “Son of David”? We are not told (I can imagine that word of mouth may have reached him; or maybe just the presence of this crowd bustling around Jesus clued him in that this Jesus was a notable personage). What strikes me is the immediate reversal of the crowd’s attitude toward him when Jesus bids him be called over. They go from telling him to shut up to, “*Take heart; get up, he is calling you.*” Suddenly Bartimaeus is “in” because Jesus wants him “in”? At that Bartimaeus leaps (he is blind, not lame)! He throws off his cloak and runs to Jesus.

An aside on that cloak. It is apparently his sole possession. The Old Testament prophets went after those who took away the meager possessions of the poor, especially that which would have provided them shelter. This would describe Bartimaeus' cloak: his covering against the elements, a place for him to sit outside the gate along the dusty highway, a receptacle for what ever meager offerings may spill his way. All of it cast aside for the opportunity to come to Jesus.

So come he does, and Jesus asks him the very same question he asked James and John just before this (are we to take this as a contrast? I think so!): ***“What do you want me to do for you?”*** James and John wanted position, stature, prestige. Bartimaeus wants to see. You may recall a few Sundays back a deaf man with a speech impediment was brought to Jesus and Jesus went through some pangs to help him hear and speak (touched his ears, spat on his tongue; I read this week that this is called a “haptic event” ... “haptic” has to do with the sense of touch). There is no such physical component to addressing Bartimaeus' problem. What are we to make of this? I think the answer is to be found in the dialog between Jesus and Bartimaeus.

Dialog includes physical expressions. When Bartimaeus ***“sprang up”*** in response to Jesus' expressed willingness to have him draw near, he tossed away his cloak. That one action revealed that Bartimaeus had real expectation that Jesus was going to do something; to leave his cloak behind was to do precisely what Jesus had told the rich man he needed to do: rid himself of all that encumbered him. To be sure the rich man ***“was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”*** Bartimaeus had just the one possession, but that was immediately cast aside in order to draw close to Jesus. Nothing was going to stand in the way of his coming to Jesus.

Now pay close attention to this exchange: ***“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.”***

I read this passage at least a dozen times and missed this: ***“MY teacher, let me see AGAIN.”***

Bartimaeus has moved from formality to intimacy — from ***“son of David”*** to ***“my teacher”*** ... what accounts for that change? I think it has to be Jesus’ invitation: ***“Call him here.”*** Whenever Jesus invites, there is an immediate sense of belonging — you are invited into his presence, not just to stand before him like a guard on duty or an defendant before the bench, but drawn into his embrace as the beloved.

And then catch the last part of Bartimaeus’ request: ***“...let me see again.”*** Apparently Bartimaeus was not blind from birth; something happened to cause his blindness. We are not told what that was — an accident, illness, something developmental like cataracts?

My tendency has always been to see Bartimaeus as an old man, but nothing in the text demands or even suggests that; we are told only that he is a blind beggar. Something turned his life to ruin; what is amazing to me is that he does not ask Jesus to return him to his previous life, just that he may see again. Now you can extrapolate that to imply that with vision he might return to whatever it was he was able to do before.

Now I need to tread carefully here, because I don’t want to overexegize these words of Jesus, nor do I want to lapse into something maudlin. ***“Jesus said to him, ‘Go; your faith has made you well.’”*** That’s the NRSV translation.

Does that mean that because Bartimaeus had the right kind, amount, strength, and/or quality of faith, for that reason he could see again? I quake at that thought, because that would say that his sight was the product of something over which he had control. I quake at that, because it would say that Jesus really didn’t do anything and that Bartimaeus had it in him this whole time to be the author of his own deliverance. In one sense it is the case that Jesus did not, as he did with other healings, touch, spit, stroke, or replace parts (remember the high priest’s servant in the Garden of Gethsemane, Malchus, whose ear

Peter cut off?).

But now look a bit closer at Jesus' words: Ὑπάγε, ἡ πίστις σου σεστώκεν (Upage, ay pistis sou sestoken se): ***“Go. Your faith has restored you.”*** “Restored” — isn't that the same as saying “healed”? Not exactly. Look at where blindness had consigned Bartimaeus — he was a beggar outside the city, a figure for contempt, disregard, even abuse (remember the crowd? They ***“sternly ordered him to be quiet,”*** ***“Shut up, Prized Boy, this isn't for the likes of you.”***) “Restored” means a change of futures now lie before Bartimaeus, and how do I know that? Mark tells me: ***“Immediately he regained his sight and followed [Jesus] on the way.”*** He was restored to community; he now traveled with Jesus (which necessarily meant that he went with the Twelve, the crowds, the whole shebang). In other words, before he received again the gift of sight, Jesus told him, ***“You're in!”***

Oh yes, Jesus did in fact heal him, but he did more than that; he restored him. As he has done, is doing, and will do for you and for me.

Think back now in the history of your pilgrimage. Were there times when you thought you could “go it alone” — rely on your own competency? Were there times when you were, in fact, lonely — left out, feeling not quite accepted? Have there been days of not seeing what lies ahead, and knowing a sense of discomfort, anxiety, maybe even dread because of that? Have you ever walked through that dark night when you weren't at all sure that God was there, or real, or wasn't at all concerned about what you were up against? Are you there right now (even if just a little bit)?

Then listen for Jesus: ***“Call him here.”*** ***“Call her here.”*** With outstretched arms, he invites you to come be with him. He asks what it is you want him to do for you. Maybe you don't know what this is; maybe you are convinced you know precisely the solution to your problems; maybe you are still stuck in the mode of “it's up to me to figure this out.”

Learn from Bartmaeus: *“My teacher, let me see again.”*

Early in my doctoral program, when I was being told to envision a “safe space” — a place where I could go in my imagination to feel the deep presence of Christ with me — I had a very difficult time bringing that image to mind. Session after session in small group, while others seemed to easily just kind of float into their mind’s viewing of Jesus standing by them, sitting with them, even sitting on his lap, I was feeling stuck. Then one day, I saw myself in this pencil drawing



— I was that lamb. In my mind the image changed a little bit (I saw myself looking out at anyone who happened to be looking in, sticking out my tongue as if to say, *“Nyah, Nyah. Don’t you wish you could be here?”*) but Jesus quickly dispelled that attitude.

I was restored. Over the past ten years, my safe space has changed; but I often go back to that drawing to recall the sweet sense of being restored. What is best of all, for me, is not that I finally “achieved” imaging a safe space; it is that Jesus brought me there, met me there, held me there, and to this day invites me to be with him there. I feel a bit like Bartimaeus: blind to the many places where God was calling me to walk, and serve, to love and be loved, to experience community with him and with his family, to know intimacy with “my teacher.”

Faith, it turns out, is not achieving, it is not performing, it is not believing “enough” — it is running to Jesus and hearing him tell me once again I am loved, and held, and secure in him — and then following him on the way, even (and maybe especially) when that way

is hard.

We hear nothing of Bartimaeus after this. Was he there on Palm Sunday? Was he in the crowd that wept as Jesus was paraded to Golgotha? Was he in the upper room on Pentecost? I'd like to think he was with Jesus all along the way. I'd like to think (and so I will) that I'll be walking with him ... and with you.

Amen.