

Sermon 10-25-09¹
Hebrews 7:23-28
Mark 10:46-52
Unexpected Faith

A blind beggar was sitting along the side of the road. What are we to make of this? Mark informs us that Jesus and his disciples were making their way through Jericho. After beginning their journey in Caesarea Philippi, the northern-most point in the Jewish provinces, Jesus has led this growing entourage closer to Jerusalem; closer to the hour of betrayal and crucifixion that he has alluded to three times. As they make their way out of this great city of biblical memory, the city that Joshua led the Israelites through as they moved into the promised land, Jesus is singularly focused on what lies just twelve miles ahead of him; preparing for the moment that will bring to fruition his mission and ministry to the world. When all of a sudden, the joy and exuberance of the crowd surrounding this Jesus of Nazareth is shattered by the desperate voice of a blind beggar sitting along the side of the road, the desperate voice crying out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy upon me!”

And the crowd, upset by the rudeness of this outsider, this outcast, this good-for-nothing beggar reels on the blind man, rebuking him and telling

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him to shut up. In the face of their rebuking the blind beggar pleads all the more, even louder than before, “Son of David, Have mercy upon me!” We might wonder, why is he so persistent? What is it that causes him to act this way, to shout out for mercy from a man he doesn’t even know?

Imagine what life must have been like for this blind beggar. Cast to the side of the road he was treated with utter contempt. Forced to beg for money and rely on the kindness of those around him, that way of life can start to grind on a person. I wouldn’t be surprised if he wasn’t a little bitter about his situation; about the way he has been treated time and again by being cast to the side of the road forced to live a half-life. In a society that values what a person can contribute, the blind beggar can give nothing back. As Karl Barth has remarked on his sermon on this passage, look at what life has made of this person. Life, it would seem, has stripped him of his personhood, cast him aside, and forced him to be a nuisance; forced him to harass people for money and favor to eek out some semblance of a life. That is surely why the crowd so quickly rebukes him. They know this man, they’ve seen him time and again, they’ve heard his wails and his cries, but they can take them no more as he tries to impede Jesus’ journey. Still, despite bitterness, despite rebuking, despite whatever lot “life” has cast him,

the man makes an unexpected leap of faith crying out “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” And Jesus stood still; stopping in his tracks, commanding his disciples and the crowd saying, “Call him!”

Despite his very physical blindness, the blind beggar is able to not only see but is also able to perceive something about this Jesus character that others have missed or are blind to. And by way of confirming this blind beggars’ insight, Jesus calls the man from out of his current way of life, inviting the man to join with him in fellowship, and graciously asks the blind beggar, “What do you want me to do for you?” It’s upon this question that Jesus encounters blind Bartimaeus with that the whole passage pivots. For in response to Jesus’ question, blind Bartimaeus cries out of the depths of his pain and separation, cries out of the depths of his brokenness asking for nothing more than to be made whole again; not asking to sit at Jesus’ right hand or left hand as James and John did, but pleading that Jesus would restore not just his sight but his very life that had been broken because of his blindness. And immediately, Bartimaeus is able to see again – healed out of the freedom of Christ’s love and power, made possible because of Bartimaeus’ unfailing trust in who Jesus is and what he is able to do. For someone whose life was in such shambles and bitterness, it is unexpected

faith indeed. Now I wish I could say that we're all like Bartimaeus, but when we're honest with ourselves, we probably would be lumped in with the crowd, rebuking him until Jesus showed favor.

When I was in seminary, I had a friend who always got caught up in the flow of things. It never failed. When she first arrived, she wanted to pursue a Ph.D in biblical studies. Soon after, she met a boy who was interested in mission work and suddenly she wanted to be doing mission work. After that, she met someone who was interested in archeology so she wanted to do biblical archeology. It always seemed that what happened to her in the midst of life, whatever different events she found herself caught up within, she would assume that that was the proper way for her to go. She spent so much time thinking about where she was going that she never stopped to wonder where she was in the moment. I'm sure you all know someone, whether it's a friend or a family member, who acts in this way. Who sort of jumps on the bandwagon of life, goes with the flow with their focus solely on the future, so much so that in the end their pursuits drive them toward dead ends. This was the issue in our gospel lesson from last week with James and John.

James and John's question to Jesus came from a selfish and self-serving desire. By contrast, Bartimaeus asks Jesus that his personhood be restored and in this way he is opened up for a life of discipleship that had otherwise been hidden from him. While James and John initially left everything to follow Jesus, they lost the vision of what his mission and ministry were really about. Bartimaeus, on the other hand, does not take Jesus for granted but begins to see again in a new and fresh way. Beneath the surface of his question, and the very practical desire to see again, lies an ardent desire to see and to apprehend not only who God is in the flesh of his humanity but also to see and know what it truly means to follow this God who has given himself to be known in, through, and as Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

While being a disciple is supposed to be an illuminating experience, sometimes we can get so caught up in the flow of things that we lose sight of the glory there before our eyes. We take things for granted and try to live our lives separate from God's steadfast love and mercy. What Bartimaeus reminds us of is the reality that our lives are empty, flat, and down-right broken apart from God's saving love in Jesus Christ. Sure we could walk around separated from God, cutting ourselves off from his promises and

loving every minute of it. We could do that, but it doesn't change the fact that the brokenness remains unhealed, the bitterness is still there, and when the pain of sin and death impinges we're apt to sit like blind beggars wailing at the heavens all-the-while wondering why "fate" dealt us this heavy hand. And yes, even when living in the midst of the faith, life is messy; the pain of sin and death still impinges upon our lives. Yet the very messiness of life is the prism through which the glory of the gospel is made known to us.

Jesus didn't come proclaiming the Kingdom of God in the midst of a vacuum. No, he came into the midst of a weary and broken world, making the very love of God himself known to all in the healing of the blind, the forgiveness of the destitute, and ultimately revealing that love on his cross. We might suffer and not know why, nevertheless we rejoice that God, the Lord God almighty, creator of heaven and earth has stooped to be with his people by becoming one with us; has penetrated into the depths of our life, taking upon himself our sin and the terrible burden of life – taking all of that up into himself and making it his own through the flesh of his humanity to heal our brokenness, our pain, our desperation so that like Bartimaeus, we might truly know and trust that our wounds are healed, that we are saved in the midst of this life because the God who encounters us in, through, and as

Jesus Christ reigns victorious over all that is old, redeeming it from within and ushering in the glory of the new life in him.

Friends we all will walk around from time to time, blinded by our own stupidity; yet even in the midst of those moments we can cry out like Bartimaeus and trust that as he reigns even now over all things, Jesus is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since, as the author of Hebrews reminds us, he always lives to make intercession for us. Even now he lays hold of our lives, dwelling within us through the power of the Holy Spirit; not only cleaving to us “by an indivisible bond of fellowship, but with a wonderful communion, day by day, he grows more and more into one body with us,”² until that day when our lives are so completely found wrapped up within his life. This is how far our Lord is willing to go for us, to hell and back, that we might belong wholly to him, and find our healing and salvation – our very lives – in him alone. Praise, glory, and honor be to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; now and unto ages of ages. Amen.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.2.24