

St. Paul's Congregational Church
October 28, 2018; Mark 10: 46-52 – 25B
Take Heart
The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

“What do you want me to do for you?”

The rich young man asked Jesus, what must I do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus told him – this is what I can do for you – show you the way: sell what you have, give to the poor, and come, follow me. And the rich young man walked sadly away – for he had great possessions.

When James and John came forward to Jesus, he asked them the same question – “What do you want me to do for you?” Their response: grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory. And Jesus told them, “Whoever would be first must be slave of all.”

Today we meet Bartimaeus: another call story, another healing story as Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem, another case of Jesus asking the same question, “What do you want me to do for you?”

Then yesterday as I was writing I had the TV on – and suddenly I was aware of yet another breaking news story – multiple fatalities after a mass shooting at the Pittsburgh Tree of Life synagogue. This after a terribly difficult week including domestic terrorism incidents, pipe bombs in the mail, incessant crazy rhetoric – and closer to home walking with 3 different people dealing with illness, difficult diagnoses, the ravages of age – with almost constant prayer of, Dear God, how long! It's too much!

And then came the realization that Jesus was asking me, asking each of us, the same question: “What do you want me to do for you.”

We yearn for compassion, empathy, a sense of peace, for healing, don't we. Maybe the Bartimaeus story can help us – it's a different story, it shows us a different response to Jesus' question, it brings me some hope for these dreadfully unsettling times.

So, what's different here? First, the man healed here has a name – Bar-Timeaus, son of Timeaus – Mark underscores that for us. Why is this person named when most people healed in the gospel miracle accounts are not? Maybe we know his name because he didn't fade back into the crowd - he told his story as he followed Jesus on the way. Maybe his healing, his journey to wholeness continued after his sight was restored. Discipleship is

about healing, call, response, and then telling the story, isn't it. Disciples are called to spread the good news – to evangelize.

Secondly: how was Bartimaeus healed? Not by Jesus' physical touch – not like the blind man in Bethsaida who Jesus healed by the laying on of his hands. Bartimaeus was healed by the word – by the emphasis on his faith. The relationship between faith and healing is underlined here: your faith has made you well.

This story teaches us about faith – it redefines faith, I think, into an action. Belief, faith, creates an action. Because of our faith we are called to do something. And we always have a choice how, or indeed if, we'll respond.

Blind Bartimaeus is sitting by the roadside begging in Jericho. It's a small town – people have known each other all their lives. There's nothing else for Bartimaeus to do - nothing else for any blind person to do – except just sit there begging. There was no training, no welfare for the disabled, simply the mercy of people passing by. Picture him sitting there – his mantle – or his cloak – his only possession - draped across his lap. Maybe there was a hollow in the center to receive coins thrown by passersby. Making a hollow so he could reach in and feel the coins – then he could gather them and put them into his pocket. His whole life, if you will, was contained in that mantle draped across his lap.

As he sits there, Bartimaeus hears the crowd gather around him, feels their movement. Something exciting is happening, but he can't see what it is. The people around him have known him for years – some are sympathetic, some indifferent, some openly hostile. Some of them tell him what the commotion is: Jesus of Nazareth is passing by. What do you imagine Bartimaeus has heard about Jesus?

Here's this blind man – in the midst of a crowd – he can't run because he can't see. He can't walk because the crowd is so thick – he might get trampled.

So what does he do? He reacts as though he's been waiting for the coming Jesus. He takes a deep breath and he shouts. Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me. He shouts louder and louder above the din of the crowd - he doesn't quit. Even when those standing by him try to silence him, shout over him telling him to be quiet. In fact then he yells even louder – on that dusty road, with all the noise of people and animals – it must have been a loud and strong voice that reached over all that noise and caused Jesus to stand still.

Jesus in the midst of all that chaos hears the words that really matter – Jesus Christ, Son of David – have mercy on me.

Jesus in the midst of all the chaos surrounding us today hears the words that really matter – Jesus Christ, Son of David, have mercy on us.

These words reach Jesus and make him stop. Like the touch on his garment by a woman in pain. Like the cry of the children who have been pushed away. Jesus stops. Jesus hears the cry and responds. Call him here. So the kindhearted in the crowd open a path and tell Bartimaeus – take heart. Get up. He is calling you.

What comforting words – take heart. The Lord has heard your cry. Take heart – your prayer is heard by the Lord. Take heart – you are no longer alone. No longer the despised, ignored, patronized person begging by the roadside. Take heart. You matter. You are no longer an outsider.

And now the moment for Bartimaeus is here. It's quiet. All eyes are on him. He can't see it, but he's the center of attention. He's been crying out – he's finally been heard. Someone is listening! Jesus is listening. The famous one who has healed before. He's here. And he's listening to me! Can you imagine how Bartimaeus felt?

Now, put yourself in his place – how would you feel? How would you respond?

And what does Bartimaeus do?

He doesn't sit back and shake his head – never mind, it's not important. You're busy – I'm just a beggar. You far have more important things to do. No – that's not what he does.

He throws off his mantle – his cloak, and springs up. The hollow in the mantle disappears – the coins go flying everywhere. He goes through the clear path to Jesus. His whole life as he knew it changes as he jumps up from that sitting position and goes to Jesus. In that moment he throws off everything that he has been and walks into a new, different, hopeful, joyful future.

Have you ever had such a moment in your life when you threw off your mantle and went to Jesus?

Jesus looks directly at Bartimaeus. At that moment nobody else in the crowd exists – it's just the two of them. And Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you." Jesus asks him to name what it is that is holding him back. What do you want? What do you need? What is your deepest desire?

In other places, at other times Jesus has asked others, including his closest disciples the same question – but they couldn't answer it. But Bartimaeus does. A simple request: Teacher, let me see again.

Bartimaeus is persistent! Annoyingly so from the point of view of the crowd as they think is Jesus asking a foolish question? What do you want? Of course Bartimaeus wants his sight back – how else would he respond?

And Jesus asks us too - to name what it is we want.

Would we dare to cry out our need if it was as great as Bartimaeus? His answer may be obvious – but to ask for something that seems impossible? Seems like such an unreal expectation here.

Do we dare to cry out our need to Jesus? Do we dare to ask for something that seems impossible? To an end to the chaos and violence and unsettledness of our times? Seems like such an unreal expectation here too.

But is it?

Maybe that's what faith is – an expectation that what you really want, really need, will happen. An expectation that by asking for what you really want, may lead you into taking an action that's risky – to throw off the mantle and change your usual behavior. Faith is an action – it leads to action, to taking risks, to making changes, to going and standing before Jesus, expressing prayer, persistently, plainly, honestly.

The healing of Bartimaeus is a testimony to the power of Jesus to restore, make well, save, those who know they are blind. Those who dare to cry out their deepest need. No matter how impossible that need seems.

I hear people talk about prayers not answered and I wonder if those prayers are not truly the cries of our deepest needs – I wonder if the pain of expressing our deepest needs stops us from doing that. I wonder if we've stopped believing in miracles, if we've stopped crying out because the noise of the crowd is so overwhelming. Because nobody seems to care, to listen. I wonder if some of our prayers are about what we think we want, not what we know we need.

I truly believe that God listens to and hears our prayers and always answers them: but the answers can be yes, no, or not now.

Maybe we don't hear or recognize that God is answering because maybe it's not what we want to hear. God gives us what we need, not necessarily what we want. And Bartimaeus teaches us that we have to do the work of knowing what it is we need. What it is we honestly, deep down, need. That's hard work, isn't it. And he teaches us to be persistent in that work. And he teaches us not to censor those deep needs we have. Is anything impossible with God? Absolutely not. So go for it!

Bartimaeus teaches us to take risks, to talk over the crowd. To talk against the crowd. In spite of indifference, even hostility, we remember this – there were kind souls in the crowd who made the path for him to approach Jesus. And Bartimaeus teaches us that we're not alone. Even in the midst of

a noisy and unruly crowd, Jesus heard him, saw him, healed him. And Jesus will hear us too.

I hear people say that their need is not so great compared to others they know. But that's not the point, is it. Bartimaeus, supposedly a blind, worthless beggar. One man in a huge crowd. A heart that longs for mercy, and the Son of God responds to this longing. That response is available to Bartimaeus, to you, to me. We're not alone. None of us is alone. None of us is unimportant. We all matter! And none of our deepest needs, our deepest wants are unimportant.

Bartimaeus gets his wish. He asks and he is answered. He knocks and the door is opened. Jesus calls him to himself and Bartimaeus literally jumps at the chance. He jumps up, leaving all his meager possessions there in the dust. And after he expresses his wish, Jesus tells him, as he has said to so many others, go – your faith has made you well. Can you imagine more wonderful words than these?

The encounter doesn't take long. The question is asked, the request is granted, the sight is regained. Jesus tells him to go. But Bartimaeus stays with him. He cannot be away from the source of his light. He is ready to follow Jesus from now on.

We don't know what happens to him after this. We don't know if he went all the way to Jerusalem to witness the triumphant entry, the agony of the passion. It is possible that, when the time came, he was one of the first Christians. Mark simply tells us that he regained his sight and followed him on the way. On the way – code in the Bible for the early church.

In these most difficult, unsettling, frightening days, we too are called to turn to the God of all lights and receive the sight that makes us to see the Son of God in all his compassion and mercy. And let us follow on the way, never falling by the wayside. Because, as this story assures us, in the midst of a great crowd, each one of us, however small, poor, despised, matters to Jesus. We too, can cry out, Jesus Christ, Son of David, I want to see again. And healing, restoration will come.

Bartimaeus knew that. So do we – so let us throw off our mantles and jump up, sure that Jesus hears us too – and healing, restoration will come – our faith can move mountains! Our faith will move mountains! Nothing is impossible with God. We can count on that, now and always. Precious Lord, take our hands through the dark, through the storm to your light. Thanks be to God for the promise of healing, of wholeness.

Amen.