

## Making Room

Romans 12: 9-21; Mark 10: 46-52

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Kyle Childress

Jesus, his disciples, and a big crowd were passing out of the city of Jericho, “on the way” to Jerusalem. Jericho, an oasis city, was a very old city, even in the days of Jesus, and it was the last stop from the south before making that last 15 treacherous miles north to the Holy City of Jerusalem. Remember, the road from Jericho to Jerusalem was the road of the Good Samaritan parable, so Jericho was a stopping place for pilgrims going up to Jerusalem and where they’d get organized and travel in groups for safety.

And there outside the city gate on the north side of town, outside on the margins of society, out on the edge of town, sat this blind man, with his cloak stretched out before him, so he could panhandle the pilgrims heading toward Jerusalem.

This blind man really doesn’t have a name. Mark tells us that he was Bartimaeus, which means “son of Timaeus,” so he was known by who he was related to more than having a proper name. “You know ... that blind man outside the gate; I think he’s Timaeus’ son.” His father has a name but he doesn’t; he is simply the son of Timaeus out on the margin of town – out by the junkyards, shut-down and rusting factories, and run down slums on the edge of town.

Bartimaeus hears that the commotion and crowd in front of him is because Jesus of Nazareth is passing by, so he begins to yell, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Two things of significance: first, Mark tells us that Bartimaeus, though blind and outside acceptable society, outside the city, is the first to call to Jesus using a title of messiah-ship, “Son of David.” Son of David meant Jesus was the Messiah, the Chosen One of God, and this blind man is the first one to see that. Everyone else is blind to who this is in their midst. Second, Bartimaeus cries for mercy, not blessing. He doesn’t call out, “God bless me!” more of a cry of entitlement, as in “Give me what I deserve.” Instead, he cries for mercy, a cry for grace and gift.

And an interesting thing happens. He is crying out to Jesus for mercy, the disciples and some of the members of the crowd, tell him to hush up. “Shush! Jesus is talking and we can’t hear him.” “Be quiet! You’re making a scene!” “Hush! We’re in the running for the friendliest city in Judea and you’re making us look bad.” “Here’s a dollar, now be quiet!”

But instead of shutting up, Bartimaeus cries out all the more, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” He’s not intimidated; he’s not cowed into silence. He is persistent, loud, and getting on people’s nerves. He won’t shut up.

From time to time, we have people in need of help come knocking on our door here at the church. Sometimes they come because they see the sign but other times, they come because they’ve heard that we actually try to help. And sometimes, not all times, we’ll help in some modest way: I’ll put gas in their car or on rare occasions I’ll go down and buy them some groceries (although they’ll get more groceries if they’ll go next door to Sacred Heart or over to Helping Other People Eat). Sometimes they’re asking for work, even if it’s day labor, just to make enough to get by or get out some trouble they’re in.

And sometimes, they come back and come back and come back. Some of these who are persistent are working the system, but not always. And even if

they're working the system, they're trying to survive. What Cindy and I face is how much do we get involved and how much do we do to help them? Even in the best of circumstances (meaning that I believe they are sincere and trying hard) to help them is to get involved. And to get involved takes enormous time.

People do not get into places of bare survival easily or simply and to help them in any significant way is not simple or easy. It takes time and involvement.

Bartimaeus is persistent and to deal with him is going to mean getting involved. Giving him a dollar won't suffice. Telling him to go to LOVE, Inc. won't do it. And telling him that tax cuts for Wall Street will help him is an insult.

At the same time, for me to read this story also invites me to ask, "Who today yells for attention and involvement?" Most of the time, most of us do not have homeless people or people in poverty knocking on our doors asking for help. What we do see and hear is television and internet news and reports and interviews and profiles and story after story about Wall Street and how tax cuts allow the wealthy and corporations to invest in jobs and therefore, they don't need to pay taxes, and so on. We constantly hear and see stories about Washington, the White House, Congress, Austin, and who running for president and who's not. We are inundated by the cries of the rich and powerful, who own the news outlets, who hire the massive numbers of lobbyists, who do the studies, who finance the campaigns and who make the big donations.

But what about those who have no voice? Who hears the cries of people in poverty today? Where are the voices of those out on the edge? Furthermore, who helps poor people have a voice?

Well Bartimaeus won't shut up. And Jesus stops. Jesus is willing to take time.

A blind man, who could easily have been overlooked, with such a throng along the roadside, caught Jesus' attention. Bartimaeus is persistent - crying out for attention as an example of how to pray without ceasing, not easily denied, passionate.

But at the same time, Jesus also had this curious habit of noticing the person who might otherwise be absorbed into the landscape. Jesus is like Francis of Assisi, whom G. K. Chesterton described as "a man who cannot see the woods for the trees. St. Francis was a man who did not want to see the woods for the trees. He wanted to see each tree as a separate and almost a sacred thing." (G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* [Garden City: Doubleday, 1957], p. 87.)

Mark specifically says that Jesus "stood still," and paid attention to Bartimaeus. Jesus stops. Jesus slows down. He stops where he is able to notice those in need, and he is not so busy that he can't get involved.

Jesus says, "Call him here." Jesus does not go to him; he knows that there are some things that this blind man can do for himself. Give him some respect; give him dignity; give him responsibility.

And Bartimaeus jumps up, throws his cloak away, throws away his only means of a livelihood, the cloak that he spreads in front of him so people will know who he is and what he needs as they throw money on it. He flings his cloak away and comes to Jesus.

Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" This story is shifting. From a blind man on the edge of a crowd, now it is a face-to-face encounter between Jesus and Bartimaeus. Sort of the calm eye in the middle of a loud, stormy crowd, Jesus meets with Bartimaeus as a person, and he gives Bartimaeus a chance to be heard. "What do you want me to do for you?"

Notice Mark tells us this exact same question was just asked by Jesus up in verse 10:36, when Jesus asked James and John, “What do you want me to do for you?” and they answer, “Give us positions of power. Let one of us sit at your right hand and the other sit at your left hand, when you overthrow Herod and the Romans.”

Now, in the very next story, Mark tells us that this poor, blind man is asked the same question. And he gives a very different answer.

Bartimaeus says, “Master, let me receive my sight, again.”

Because Jesus gives Bartimaeus a chance to be heard, we learn a critical piece of information. “Let me see **again**,” Bartimaeus says. And then we know that this story is not just about blindness, but it is about loss. We know that Bartimaeus wasn’t born blind, he became blind. So we know he’s gone through an experience of pain, of loss, of despair. We don’t know if it was disease or an accident, or violence from the Romans, but something took his eyesight away. If it happened when he was a child, he lost his hopes. If it happened when he was an adult, he lost his ability to make a living. So now we understand far more about Bartimaeus. He is hoping not just for sight, but restoration. How many years have passed since the loss? How many years has it been since he has been a beggar, unable to work? How many years has he begged beside the road without respect, until Jesus gives him the gift of respect by hearing him, listening to him?

I remember when I was a brand-new young, zealous pastor of a rural church in central Texas. I preached hard on racism and I got some serious push-back. But as I learned to be a pastor, I learned to stop running here and there, slow down, and listen to people. I sat on their porches with them, hoed weeds in their gardens with them, sawed wood with them, went fishing with them, and shared meals with them.

And as I listened to their stories, I learned that their racism was rooted in being afraid. It wasn't hatred or simply being closed minded; it was fear. And from then on, I changed how I preached. I still preached about race but I tried to speak to our fear and only after I began to speak to our fear did I began to see movement on race. Learning to listen to what was really going on, and giving people a chance to speak and be heard was a valuable lesson.

Jesus responds to Bartimaeus, "Go; your faith has made you well." And Mark concludes, "Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way."

Like the Gadarene demoniac earlier, Jesus heals Bartimaeus and says, "Now go on back home." In the earlier story, the healed demoniac returns to his hometown as a whole person. But in this story, Bartimaeus does not go back home, he "follows Jesus on the way." He becomes a disciple of Jesus' along with the other disciples, on the way.

The church has long considered this a story of hospitality. It is a key reminder of one of the most central and important practices in Christianity: hospitality. Hospitality in the New Testament is how we translate the word, "philoxenos" or "love of the stranger." It is the opposite of "xenophobia" which interestingly comes to us directly from the Greek, meaning "fear of the stranger."

Hospitality does not mean in the New Testament, our toned-down, domesticated image of sharing tea and crumpets with a friend. It is much, much more. Hospitality, loving the stranger, making room for the outsider, the outcast, the immigrant, the person considered different, is a core teaching of the Christian faith. We know that the essence of the God known as Trinity, Father, Son, and

Holy Spirit, is this continual giving of self, making room for the other, even within the Godhead. This Triune God made room for the other in the very act of creation so that all of creation is welcomed and received by God.

The church has always remembered that in Gen. 18, when Abraham and Sarah received and fed the three mysterious strangers who told Sarah that in her old age she would conceive and have a baby that we are to receive strangers because in so doing we are receiving “angels unaware.” And we have taught that as we do it unto the least of these we are doing unto Christ himself.

This week our theme in Vacation Bible School is “Embracing All God’s Children,” and it’s about hospitality. How can we be a more hospitable church and how can we practice hospitality in our own lives and our own homes?

Back to Bartimaeus: It is interesting to me that the Bible and the church has always remembered this blind man’s name, even if it was a “no-name.” Scholars believe that Mark tells us his name “Son of Timaeus” because he was well known in the Christian community when the Gospel of Mark was being circulated some 35 or 40 years after the event happened. Scholars believe that he was known personally to Mark. Many of the people healed in the gospels fade away into anonymity. Perhaps his name was remembered precisely because he called out and refused to give up. And he followed and kept following.

Amen and amen.