

There IS a Balm

Mark 10:46-52, Jeremiah 8:18-22

The First United Presbyterian Church of Craffton Heights

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*To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit
<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2018/12/sermon12-02-2018.mp3>*

I've come to notice something over the years, and perhaps you have, too. Often times when I am getting toward the end of a sermon, our musicians will slide into place behind their instruments. Sometimes I wonder how they know I'm getting close – they don't have an advance copy or anything – but they pick up on my rhythm or content or pace and often find themselves in position at the close of the message. Our friend Brian Buckley was a master at this – it was mystifying, and a little spooky, how good he was at knowing when I was done. In fact, he was so good at it that there were a couple of times when I heard him slide onto the organ bench behind me when I still had a page and a half to go on the message that I wondered, "Wait...*should* I be done now?"

Of course, if you ask the musicians, they'll say, "Gee, you listen to a guy for a couple of years/decades, and you kind of get a feel for where he's going. There are clues to be heard..." And because they pick up on these clues, there are shifts in the content and direction of our worship that day.



¹I bring that up this morning because as we hear our Gospel reading for today, we ought to be attentive to some clues that are there. This is the second and last time that Mark reports the healing of a person who was blind. I think that when Mark mentions the fact that

¹ *Christ Healing the Blind Man*, Robert Hodgell, c. 1960

Bartimaeus was blind, he wants us to think back to the *last* time a person's sight was restored. In chapter 8, the healing of the man in Bethsaida marked a turning point in the ministry of Jesus. Prior to that miracle, Jesus seemed to be focusing his ministry on a proclamation of the Good News throughout the Galilee that often featured large groups and great wonders (such as the feeding of the 5000). The incident in Bethsaida effectively closed that part of Jesus' ministry and led to a new emphasis: one that was focused more intentionally on the disciples and those around him. After the healing of the blind man in Bethsaida, we hear Peter's declaration of Jesus as the Messiah, we see the transfiguration, and we listen to Jesus' teaching about his suffering, death, and resurrection as he leaves the Galilee and walks toward his destiny in Jerusalem.

Today's passage – another encounter with a sightless person – therefore is meant to send another signal: there are changes ahead. We see that Jesus is in Jericho, which is only fifteen miles outside of Jerusalem, and so we ought to expect this story to serve as a bridge between that which we've already experienced in the Gospel and that which is to come.

And, in a lot of ways, the encounter with Bartimaeus is a commentary on what has come before. We meet him and we are told that he is a blind beggar. In Jesus' day and age, that is a bit of repetition. If a person was blind, of course that person would be a beggar. There weren't many other options for folk who experienced disability in that day. Saying that Bartimaeus was a blind beggar is every bit as redundant as it would be for me to say, "Here, would you like some cold ice?", or "this is a delicious blueberry pie", or "I'd like you to meet my friend, who is a disappointed Browns fan..." You see? Saying one thing (he was blind) implies the other (he

was a beggar). Mark's point is that Bartimaeus was an outsider, and, more than that, he was a no-account outsider. He's not a Pharisee, he's not a rich young ruler. He's on the fringes of society.



²And Bartimaeus is not just any marginalized person, he's experiencing this marginalization in Jericho. Jericho, as previously noted, is about fifteen miles outside of Jerusalem. At that time, Jericho was home to a large contingent of priests and Levites – professional workers at the Temple in Jerusalem. It was a “bedroom community” for the religious elite, if you will. Bartimaeus was a sightless, marginalized, seemingly irrelevant person living in a community that was home to thousands of people who were being paid to watch for and point to the coming Savior of God – the One who, to borrow a phrase from the prophet Jeremiah, would be the “balm” of healing for God's people. And yet in spite of the fact that there were all of these professional religious people on hand, it falls to a marginalized, sightless, economically disadvantaged member of the community to be the first person in the Gospel of Mark to call Jesus by the messianic title “Son of David.”

Furthermore, you might remember that previously in Mark's Gospel, whenever someone did call out Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus would hush that person. This is the first time that Jesus accepts a public acknowledgment of his role. This is new in the Gospel of Mark. And it happens in Jericho – home to the religious professionals. And he's recognized by someone who is, to say the least, surprising.

² *Lord, That I May See*, William Kurelek (1955)



³In addition, Bartimaeus refuses to be hindered in his approach to Jesus. Do you remember when the children were being brought to the Lord? The disciples kept them away. Do you remember when the rich young man came and asked to follow? He could not, because his possessions weighed him down. Bartimaeus won't let either the crowd or his belongings slow him down, and so he shouts above the throng and throws aside his cloak – which, as a beggar, would have been his most prized possession and a symbol of his identity – and he leaps to his feet and rushes to Jesus' side. Do you see how this story is a commentary on what has come before?

There's another clue that this is not an isolated event, but rather one meant to be read in context. Just a few verses ago, Jesus looked at the men who had been following him the longest and asked, "What do you want me to do for you?" Here, he looks at a man he's just met and uses the exact same words. James and John call Jesus by a professional title, "master", and ask for positions of power and honor in the kingdom that is to come. Yet when Jesus asks Bartimaeus the exact same question, the sightless man calls Jesus "Rabbouni", and says simply, "I'd like to see again".

Whereas lots of people call Jesus "Rabbi", which means "teacher", there are only two people who call him "Rabbouni", which means "*my* teacher: Bartimaeus (as Jesus prepares to enter Jerusalem) and Mary Magdalene (when she recognizes Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane after his resurrection). My point is that Mark intends us to notice that Bartimaeus, for all of his limitations and marginalization, is eager to align his life to God's will.

³ *Bartimaeus*, sculpture by Gurdon Brewster

In all of this, I am suggesting that the writer of Mark's Gospel intended this encounter with Bartimaeus to be a summary of Jesus' teaching on discipleship. In these few verses, Jesus calls and invites a person to new possibilities for this life with the understanding and expectation that these new possibilities will change the realities for the one who answers the call. When Bartimaeus received from Jesus the thing for which he'd asked, he understood that the Lord had not healed him so that he could be a *sighted* beggar. When he regained his vision, he left his cloak on the ground for someone who needed it more, and he followed Jesus on the way. This meeting in Jericho gives Mark the chance to show his readers how disciples ought to respond to the intrusion of the Divine in their lives.

So... in the words of that renowned theologian Dr. Phil, "How's that workin' for ya?"



For a moment, I'd like you to close your eyes and imagine Jesus drawing near to you, and opening up new possibilities in *your* life. When the Son of David says to *you*, "What do you want me to do for you?", how do you answer? I hope you noticed that when Jesus encountered Bartimaeus, he was respectful. He didn't presume to speak for Bartimaeus – instead, he allowed the man to speak for himself. Similarly, when we celebrate communion in a few moments, there will be an invitation to receive – but there is not ever a "force feeding". What do you want Jesus to do for you? Think about that.

And as you imagine Jesus asking you you, consider this: what will you need to leave behind? Bartimaeus was in such a hurry to reach the Lord that he threw his cloak aside. What about you? What do you need to leave be in order to approach Jesus unhindered?

Some folks might think that is glaringly obvious. You've battled a demon – and maybe carried it around with you - for far too long. A friend of mine told me that he once asked a convert to the faith, "What's different about your life now that you're following Jesus?" The new disciple, who had come out of a street gang, thought for a moment and said, "Well, I guess I don't shoot as many people now as I used to..."

And that's good. That's very good. But what about you? Is there a pattern in your life that is contrary to the Good News of the Kingdom that Jesus proclaims? I suspect you don't shoot many people, either... but what about your worry? Or your anxiety? Or your fear? Can you set those down as you seek to follow?

What about your arrogance or your temper? Can you ask Jesus to give you a spirit of humility?

"What do you want me to do for you?" He's asking. And as you hear that question, consider who it is that is asking. Is it Jesus the enforcer, the sheriff, the one who's here to make sure you get what's coming to you? Or is it Jesus the Wizard of Oz, who promises you escape and enchantment? Or is it Jesus the *rabbouni*, the one who is *your teacher*?

This morning, this week, this Advent – hold onto those questions. Reflect. Anticipate. And praise God for healing that does come. Praise God that there *is* a balm in Gilead. Thanks be to God! Amen.