

What Do You Want? – Mark 10:46-52 – October 25, 2015

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As they travel towards the city of Jerusalem, Jesus knows that his time with his disciples is drawing to an end, and so he is trying to get them ready. He cares deeply for them, and wants them to be equipped for the upheaval that's about to come once they reach Jerusalem. Like a professor trying to get his students ready for the big test, the disciples don't realize the final exam is on the horizon. They simply do not understand. Over and over again, as Jesus teaches and explains to them, they miss the point.

This journey to the city begins and ends with the healing of a blind man. At the end of chapter eight of this gospel is one of my favorite stories in all the gospels. The story goes like this. In the village of Bethsaida, the people brought a blind man to Jesus and they begged Jesus to touch him. Jesus took the blind man out of the village. He spat into his hands and then put the saliva on the eyes of the blind man. Jesus then asked him if he could see anything. The man looked, and said, "I think I see people, but they look like trees, walking." The man's vision was not perfect. Objects were blurry to him. He couldn't quite make them out. He could see, but not completely. Then Jesus touched his eyes a second time, and this time the man's vision was perfectly clear.

I love this story, partly because of its uniqueness. It's the only healing story in any of the gospels where the healing doesn't work the first time. Jesus has to touch the man twice before he is fully healed of his blindness. Questions arise, did Jesus mess up the healing? Did he do it wrong the first time?

No, I don't believe he messed up. This two part healing sets the stage for what is to come on the journey to Jerusalem. This healing of physical blindness becomes a metaphor for the spiritual blindness that is exhibited by the disciples. And this is the other part I love about this story. That faith in Jesus doesn't have to be a one time deal. Like - You either get it or you don't. Fortunately for us, there is room for growth. There is room for progression. There is room for further healing.

The same idea continues throughout the journey to Jerusalem. You may recall the story of the rich man who came to Jesus with the question, how do I inherit eternal life? And Jesus told him to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor. The man walked away grieving because he had many possessions. The rich man needed his material goods for his security. He was afraid to rely on Jesus to take care of his needs. The story was open-ended. The man walked away, but he could still sell his stuff and follow Jesus.

Jesus looked on him with love, because he knew how hard it was to give up one's own control and trust in God to be in control of one's life. It could very well be that in time the rich man was able to follow Jesus and trust in him. Like the blind man in Bethsaida, he needed to be touched more than once to completely remove his blindness. He needed more than one experience with Jesus to become completely whole. And that goes for us as well. Can any one of us here today

say that we completely trust in God for our every need? Can any one of us honestly say that we are following Jesus in every aspect of our lives? But isn't that where we want to be?

And so the double healing of the blind man is good news for us. The rich man's reluctance to give up his security blanket touches us in our need to be in control of our lives. I would not hesitate to say that this blindness, this inability to "get it," is rampant among Christians.

And so too with the disciples. Remember Peter? He emphatically stated to Jesus, when asked who he thought Jesus was, "You are the Christ, the Messiah." Yet in the next instant, when Jesus gave his first death and resurrection prediction, Peter rebuked him. Jesus rebuked him right back, calling him Satan, and proceeded to give a lesson on discipleship. To be a follower of Jesus, you must expect that your whole world will be turned upside down. Throw worldly expectations out the window. Life in the kingdom of heaven looks surprisingly different than what we might anticipate it to be. This Messiah is one to rewrite all preconceived notions.

The last will be first, and the first will be last. Salt without saltiness is worthless. Receive the kingdom as a little child. If you would lead, you must first serve others. Jesus taught all this and more during the journey to Jerusalem, yet those who followed him found these to be unfathomable teachings. They could not make sense of them. They were blind to the true meaning. Instead they fantasized about their cozy positions of power and glory in the kingdom to come. And this section of Mark, this journey to Jerusalem, is about to be concluded with another healing of a blind man.

The setting shows Jesus leaving Jericho, the last stop before Jerusalem some 15 miles away. On his way out of town, Jesus had once again attracted a rather large crowd that was following him out of the city, probably due to him preaching and teaching. They bustled all around him, trying to get close. A blind man sat on the side of the road near the gate, as was the custom of beggars. Being near the gate, the center of activity in and out of town, he had a better chance of collecting enough coins to live. His cloak was stretched out in front of him. It was upon this cloak that people would toss coins in response to his begging. This cloak was his livelihood and probably his only significant possession.

As a beggar, the blind man had no worth, no status. He was lowly, impoverished, and since he was blind, it was assumed he was a sinner. But despite his lack of social worth, Mark names him. His name is Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus. Translated his name means "Son of the precious or worthy one." (William Loader, *First Thoughts*) Rather ironic, considering his precarious situation. There is nothing precious or worthy in being seen as a blind beggar.

He somehow learns that Jesus is coming by. He has heard of Jesus, and with a boldness born of desperation, he calls out above the din of the crowd, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Now if anyone in this crowd had been paying attention to the teachings of Jesus they might have immediately made way or eagerly brought Bartimaeus to Jesus. After all, the last shall be first. To

be a leader one must put the needs of others before one's own. This would have been a great time to put that new teaching into practice.

But instead, the crowd tries to quiet him. They cut him off, believing him to be of no worth. He has no right, no claim on Jesus. They order him to keep still. But instead, he cries out even louder than before. "Son of David, have mercy on me."

As I was reading this particular verse, I wondered if there are times that we keep people from having access to mercy through Jesus. Is this an instance of the "in crowd" mentality? Those of us who are already followers of Jesus, do we ever try to silence the cries of those on the "outside?" Do we hold back mercy because of our own tendency to judge the worth of another? "Those people don't deserve to be helped. They made their bed, and they need to lie in it." We judge people by their appearance, by their mental status, by their action, by their beliefs, by their sexuality, by their age, race, intelligence, political party, and on and on and on. Do we try to silence the cries of others, because we think that because they're not in the inner circle, they don't deserve mercy?

Or maybe we see it this way. People on the outside try to get a piece of Jesus, and we greedily try to keep him for ourselves. We cannot conceive of the limitless nature of God's grace and mercy and we forget that there is plenty for everyone. Sometimes the church gets so caught up in its own identity, its own pursuits, that it puts up an impenetrable barrier. If a homeless person were to walk through our front doors, unwashed and dressed in ragged clothing, would our first reaction be shock or compassion? We get so used to seeing people in their lowly state, we can't imagine anything different. Almost as if they deserve their lot in life. The crowd was in essence telling Bartimaeus, Jesus is too important and too busy to be distracted by your need. Just accept your status and situation, but don't bother us with your problems. Keep quiet and let Jesus focus on the important stuff.

But Jesus hears Bartimaeus call and without hesitation tells some in the crowd, "Call him over here." Those who would have silenced Bartimaeus are suddenly tripping over themselves to bring him to Jesus. They hurry over to him and exclaim, "This is your lucky day! He wants to see you!"

Without hesitation Bartimaeus jumps up and tosses aside his cloak. Now that seems an insignificant detail, but the cloak was his security. It provided not only warmth for his body, but was the garment upon which he collected the coins of his begging. It was an important part of his identity as a blind beggar, but when Jesus called to him, he tossed it away without a second thought. Compare this to the rich man, who was called to do a similar thing. Jesus told him, sell your stuff, give the money to the poor, and come, follow me. And he walked away sadly.

Bartimaeus, blind though he was, rushed forward to greet Jesus. And Jesus asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?" There are two points I'd like to make about this statement. The first is, that Jesus didn't make any assumptions about this man. Perhaps it would have been obvious,

here's a blind beggar, toss him a few coins, maybe give him some food, say a little prayer for him and send him on his way. But Jesus allowed the man to speak for himself. He let him have his dignity. What do you want me to do for you? What is your true need?

I think this cautions us to be careful when we are ministering to those in need. We should not make assumptions about what they want or patronizingly do what we think is "best for them." Part of our ministry to those in need requires building a relationship, allowing for communication, and finding out what is truly their desire.

Bartimaeus seeks wholeness. He doesn't want a quick fix, he wants to be made whole. He wants to be healed of his blindness. He wants to be able to see the world so that he can be a part of it, rather than live in the shadows on the outskirts. He understands what is truly important, and that is what he seeks from Jesus.

Just prior to this passage in Mark James and John came to Jesus with a request, he asked them this same question, What do you want me to do for you? And guess how did they responded? Did they seek wholeness? Did they desire to be healed of their spiritual blindness? No. Instead they sought glory and honor. They wanted to be seated next to Jesus in the coming kingdom. They got it wrong. Blind Bartimaeus got it right. He asked Jesus, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus responded, "Go. Your faith has made you well." And Bartimaeus regained his sight and followed Jesus to Jerusalem.

And this section of Mark closes. The theme of the spiritual blindness of the disciples culminates in an example of what true discipleship looks like. The story of Bartimaeus is less of a healing story and more of a call story. Bartimaeus sought Jesus. He was ready, and so Jesus called to him. Unlike the rich man, he quickly jumped up, tossed aside his cloak, his security, and he came to Jesus. He addressed Jesus as both Son of David and as teacher. He knew who he was and he wanted to be taught by him. Unlike James and John, he sought a new way of life. He wanted his eyes opened – both physically and spiritually.

To us then, the question from Jesus is the same – What do you want? What do you want me to do for you? This might require a little bit of soul searching on our part. Are we caught in some spiritual blindness? Do we even know what we want or truly believe that Jesus is willing to give it to us? Is something holding us back from seeing the world through the eyes of faith? Are we willing to look inside ourselves to see what we really need, go to Jesus and ask him, and then be willing to hear what he has to say?

Jesus stands ready to answer our deepest need. His way is not a path to glory. He doesn't promise an easy road, but when we walk with him, we will never be alone. By following him, by trusting that he knows us and understands us better than any other, we can be assured that he wants each of us to be free of our spiritual blindness and to experience a wholeness that only he can give.

