

October 12: What Do You Want Me to Do for You? (Mark 10:46-52)

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Welcome, my fellow travelers, to our series on Jesus and his complicated questions. Jesus asked a total of 307 different questions in the gospels, and was 40 times more likely to ask a question than give a direct answer. This fall, we're taking a closer look at ten of those questions; not just in their original cultural context of 200 years ago, but in our own context, here, today. We're inviting Jesus' questions to challenge and form us, and I'm so glad you're on this quest with me this morning.

Before we dive into today's question, please join me in prayer.

God of all good gifts, you are compassionate and gracious, and you satisfy our desires with good things. Please give us the courage and faith to voice what we long for in the safety of your presence. May we hear your voice of invitation and love this morning, and may you speak through me. Amen.

About twelve years ago, Luke and I were living a life that reflected the very traditional roles we had been raised with. Luke worked, and I was a stay-at-home mom who homeschooled our three young children and volunteered heavily in our local church. My life was so full that most of the time, I could ignore the flutters of longing and yearning deep inside of me.

Most of the time. However, I remember when Luke got invited to join a small men's group that was all about story – knowing your own story, knowing Jesus' story, and living a story worth living. In the context of that group, he came home and asked me what I wanted with my own story. And I didn't want to think about it. To even begin to consider the question, "What do you really want?" made my chest physically tight. I wasn't ready – yet – to do the hard work of answering.

In my opening sermon to this series, I shared that the Jesus we encounter in the gospels isn't a divine answer-man or self-help guru with simple, one-size-fits-all solutions for all of life's dilemmas. Instead, Jesus invited those he met to "come and see" – to follow him, to walk with him, to be friends with him, to learn from him. *And* he asked them a lot of questions, questions that prodded them to do hard work and own their own stories.

A good question can be like a midwife. It acknowledges that there's something inside of us that needs to be brought out into the world – and it helps us to do the hard work, the labor, of bringing that inner knowledge, that admission, that longing, that new life to birth.

Today we're invited to listen to one of Jesus' core questions, one of the few that he repeated in the gospels – “What do you want me to do for you?” We're going to look how Jesus' question intertwines with four different stories. The first two stories are from the Bible, the third story is my own, and the fourth story is yours.

“What do you want me to do for you?” It's a question that I believe Jesus offers to all of us when we come to him, and he never stops asking it. And so as you listen this morning, I invite you to notice what this question stirs in you.

The first story we're exploring is the one we read, from chapter 10 of the gospel of Mark (10:46-52). This story took place towards the end of Jesus' ministry. After three full years of traveling, healing, restoring, and demonstrating what the kingdom of heaven looks like, Jesus' face was set towards Jerusalem. He was journeying there with his disciples for Passover, and he knew that it's where he would be handed over to Roman officials and crucified. By the time Jesus got to the city of Jericho, he was only 16 miles away from the cross. So that's our setting: Jesus and his disciples, near the end of his final journey.

As you might imagine, Jesus was fairly well-known by this point; and as he left the walled city of Jericho, he was flanked not only by his disciples, but by a crowd of curious onlookers. There would have been people behind him and people preceding him, all curious about him. I grew up in Bangladesh, and no matter where our family went there, particularly in rural areas, we would very quickly attract a dense crowd of onlookers who would press in on us, stare at us, and study our every move. That's what I imagine it was like with Jesus as he left Jericho.

And then, apart from the crowd, on the edge of the road, sat a blind beggar, hoping that the people coming and going might show mercy on him. Bartimaeus son of Timaeus couldn't see what was happening – but with the sharpened senses that remained to him, he figured out what was

causing the commotion: the man he had heard so much chatter about, Jesus of Nazareth, was drawing near. Bartimaeus knew that this was his big chance, and he grasped at it with everything he had. “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” he yelled, straining to be heard over the crowd, trying to figure out exactly when Jesus would be passing closest to him.

Bartimaeus’ voice must have carried pretty well, because he created enough of a ruckus that people tried to shush him up. Maybe they thought Jesus didn’t have time to stop and deal with blind men. Maybe they just thought Bartimaeus was annoying. But maybe they were trying to hush the words he was saying. Bartimaeus was calling Jesus using a very specific title: “Son of David” – that was the title of the Messiah. This is the first time in the book of Mark that Jesus had been called the Messiah by an onlooker. Bartimaeus’ cry for mercy was also a profession of faith that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah the Scriptures prophesied about. So maybe the people who rebuked him wanted to quiet that claim.

In any case, shutting Bartimaeus up failed. He shouted all the more: “Son of David, have mercy on me!” And his persistence – it worked! Jesus stopped in his tracks – which means the whole crowd would have also ground to a halt – and told the people around him to call the blind man to come. He showed mercy.

But Jesus’ mercy didn’t begin in the way we’d expect, because he didn’t instantly heal Bartimaeus. Instead, once Bartimaeus made his way forward, Jesus engaged him with a question: “What do you want me to do for you?”

With that question, Jesus paused the action, and I want us to pause, too. Why do you think Jesus asked that? Don’t you think it was obvious to everybody what Bartimaeus needed? What was the purpose of asking?

As a blind beggar, Bartimaeus was at the very bottom of the Greco-Roman social ladder: he had no social power and influence and was therefore considered expendable. And I wonder: when was the last time somebody had asked him what he wanted instead of just giving him what they had to spare? Bartimaeus was used to surviving on what he could get. Jesus dignified and ennobled him by asking him what he wanted. He showed Bartimaeus that his words and desires had worth. Jesus endowed a blind beggar with choice and agency.

But I think that the question itself, not just the asking of it, was noteworthy, because in answering it, Bartimaeus did important work. And when we hear and answer this question, we do important work, too.

I believe that honestly answering Jesus' question requires three things. The first is **vulnerability**. Voicing what we really want requires us to name and expose areas of brokenness in our lives – places where all is not well, where we are not whole and complete. It might force us to recognize loss, or disappointment. And all of that involves pain.

In a way, Bartimaeus had an advantage in answering Jesus' question. It was clear, to him and to the world, that he needed help – he was a beggar! In his blindness and poverty, he could admit his brokenness and need better than many of us who are able to hide what's wrong.

Sometimes, though, we don't want to answer Jesus' question honestly because we feel like our honest answer is selfish, or wrong, or not worthy of our calling. Maybe what we want most right now is recognition, or power, or success, or revenge, or escape. And so we're ashamed to answer. We don't want to expose anything in us that might be ugly or unseemly. But denying what we want doesn't make it go away. If you have your Bible or Bible app with you, I invite you to look at our second story, which comes immediately before the one about Bartimaeus (Mark 10:35-45), where Jesus asked the exact same question, "What do you want me to do for you?", in a very different setting. In that story, it was James and John, two of the disciples from Jesus' inner circle, who came to him. They asked Jesus for fame and power: to sit at Jesus' right and left when he came into his glory. That was a pretty selfish request, but they still asked it. They weren't afraid to let Jesus see their desire.

Vulnerability means honestly naming what we want, even if it feels ugly. In her book titled *Teach Us to Want*, Jen Pollock Michel writes that "prayer is the courageous act of bringing our authentic desires before God... Don't be afraid of appearing angry, small-minded, obtuse, mean, immoral, amoral, calculating or anything else. Take no care for your dignity. Brave is the only way to pray."¹

¹ Jen Pollock Michel, *Teach Us to Want*, p.113, 122.

When Luke asked me, 12 years ago, what I wanted with my story, I wasn't ready to answer. I knew that an honest response would mean pulling off enough layers of protection to reveal a very vulnerable core. I would have to confront the places in my life that weren't okay, and where I wasn't content, and I didn't want to feel raw. And I wasn't sure if what I wanted would be acceptable to God or others. I wanted to protect my longings, because bringing them to light would mean they could be trampled on or diminished.

When we remember Jesus' compassion, though, we can risk vulnerability. In Matthew's version of Bartimaeus' story (Matthew 20:29-34), he writes that when Bartimaeus answered Jesus' question, Jesus was moved with compassion – he felt a gut-level solidarity with him. Never do we read of Jesus laughing at or mocking somebody who asked him for something. He didn't even rebuke James & John for the selfishness of their request, although the other disciples were pretty indignant. Matthew says that Jesus fulfills Isaiah's prophecy of the Messiah, as someone who will not break a bruised reed or snuff out a smoldering candle (Matthew 12:20). I think we all know what it's like to feel bruised and battered inside. Jesus is a safe person to reveal those bruises to. He's been bruised himself, and he will meet those hurt places with gentleness.

Answering Jesus' question begins with vulnerability, but it also requires **boldness**: the courage to ask for what we long for. Making a bold request means accepting that if it is fulfilled, our lives will change. We may need to leave the safe place we're in and go someplace new. Bartimaeus had to have known that if he received the sight he asked for, his life would change. He would no longer be dependent on other people for his livelihood. He would gain freedom, and the responsibilities that come with it. Perhaps this is one of the reasons Jesus asked him to name what he wanted. Was Bartimaeus going to ask him for something "normal" and safe, like money? Or was he going to boldly ask for something life-changing that only Jesus could give?

For me, when Luke first asked me what I wanted with my story, I was afraid of how naming my longings might change our marriage and our future. If I voiced what I wanted and actually received it, I would have to step out of a role and lifestyle that felt pretty secure for me. Answering Jesus' question requires boldness; and for me, it also meant wrestling with the question we explored last week, "Why are you so afraid?"

We need vulnerability and boldness to honestly answer the question, “What do you want?” However, in order to answer Jesus’ specific question, “What do you want me to do for you?”, there’s one more thing involved, and that is **faith**. What we ask Jesus for reflects our response to his question that Pastor Meg preached about a few weeks ago: “Who do you say that I am?”

Bartimaeus demonstrated faith in who Jesus was, both when he called out to Jesus as the Messiah and when he answered Jesus’ question. The ancient prophets had written that Messiah would bring sight to the blind, and Bartimaeus believed that was true. And perhaps that’s part of the reason Mark recorded Jesus’ question and Bartimaeus’ answer for us. He’s showing us that those labeled blind and the poor and “expendable” in society had more insight into who Jesus really was than those who had physical sight and learning and power.

When we answer Jesus’ question, “What do you want me to do for you?” we say something about who we believe him to be. Do we really believe that Jesus is the kind of person who hears our prayers and is willing and able to give gifts to us? I love Romans 8:32: “The God who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will God not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” But I struggle to believe it – I’ll twist Jesus’ question so that I hear him asking, “What can I give you that you earned?” I find it difficult to trust that Jesus is who he says he is – the perfect image of God who is love, overflowing with power and goodness and mercy. And that holds me back from asking for what I long for.

But Bartimaeus – he was able to answer Jesus’ question simply, with vulnerability, boldness, and faith. “Rabbi, I want to see!” And Jesus responded: “Go. Your faith has healed you.” Immediately, Bartimaeus received the freedom, color, and wonder that comes from sight. But that’s only the beginning of his story. He didn’t just gain his sight. He followed Jesus along the way. Jesus’ question, Bartimaeus’ answer, and Jesus’ response was the beginning of a much longer journey together.

James’ & John’s bold response to “What do you want me to do for you?” was also a step in their journey with Jesus. Jesus saw their longing and their faith, and responded to it – just not in the way they expected. If you really want to be great, he told them, let me show you how it’s done. Be a servant. Walk my downward path. Drink my cup. Come and see, and do what I do.

To go back to my story, 12 years ago: it took a few years of sitting with the question “What do you want me to do for you?” before I was able to answer it. During that time, I could feel something building in me – a longing, a fire. It took a lot of work and cries for mercy to bring that to birth. When I finally found the vulnerability and boldness and faith to voice my response, it freed me to hear Jesus’ call, and to realize that I had the freedom to pursue the next step in following him in a journey that brought me here and continues.

And now, it’s time for your story. Do you hear Jesus calling you with the same question? Are you in a place where even thinking about it makes your chest tight? Are you simply at the point of just calling out for mercy? Or are you ready to answer?

My prayer is that no matter where you are, you might hear the grace-filled invitation Jesus extends when he asks, “What do you want me to do for you?” May you sit with the question, let it form you and probe you, and turn it into a conversation. May you look to Jesus, the grace-filled, love-giving perfect image of God, and know he is looking back at you with compassion. And like Bartimaeus, may you find the grace to respond with vulnerability and boldness and faith. Amen.