

Sermon, Proper 25, Year B, Jane A. Beebe, October 28, 2018

Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." (Mark 10:51)

In the name of the living God: Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. +

The scene in today's Gospel is so visual and immediate that it could be cinematic. The action stops and starts in unexpected ways. The dialogue is direct and compelling. To begin, perhaps the camera pans across the crowd that has assembled around Jesus and the disciples as they prepare to leave Jericho. Yet immediately the focus is on a blind beggar sitting beside the roadside. We are told that his name is Bartimaeus, i.e. son of Timeaus, but no other details except that he is blind. He manages to learn through hearing that it is Jesus walking by. Bartimaeus begins to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" The blind beggar is sternly ordered to keep silent, yet cries out even more loudly. Being blind he cannot catch Jesus' eye or even know if Jesus is still near. He has only his voice with which to somehow capture Jesus' attention.

I am struck that at this point Jesus stands still. All action stops. I wonder what is in Jesus' mind and heart when he hears this man's shouts. Jesus pauses in his journey to attend to this man. Jesus asks that Bartimaeus be called to him. The disciples are now encouraging, telling Bartimaeus to take heart, to get up for, Jesus is calling him. The man does not merely rise to his feet. We are told he

throws off his cloak and springs up! Jesus then asks one of his enigmatic questions: “What do you want me to do for you?” I love that Jesus does not presume to know exactly what it is that needs healing. He allows those who come to him to name what it is, to put it into words. In the action of throwing off his cloak and springing to his feet, Bartimaeus is all hopefulness and yet vulnerable in his need. However, this man, forced to beg on the side of the road, is now on his feet. Part of the mercy that Jesus shows Bartimaeus is allowing him the dignity of speaking for himself. Bartimaeus is no longer silenced, no longer on the sidelines.

Bartimaeus says, “Teacher, let me see again.” The truth is, this man already sees clearly; this man is already, in Jesus’ eyes, entirely whole. All that remains is for Jesus to affirm that reality by saying, “Go, your faith has made you well.” The man immediately regains his physical sight—because everything in Mark happens immediately—and follows Jesus on the way. Is there a moment, though, before they set out for Jerusalem, when, standing together, Bartimaeus and Jesus look each other in the eye? I was at a funeral recently, so I still have in mind the beautiful words from Job: “After my awaking, he will raise me up; and in my body I shall see God. I myself shall see, and my eyes behold him who is my friend and not a stranger.”

We have heard the words, “What do you want me to do for you?” before. Jesus says them to James and John in the Gospel passage we heard last week.

James and John, bless their hearts—and I mean that in the complete Southern sense—have asked to sit at Jesus’ left and right when Jesus is glorified. The glory the disciples envision sharing with Jesus is not what they imagine. (And a brief caveat: I am not one for bashing the disciples too much. They are after all, all of us). Yet Jesus tells them in God’s Kingdom the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. Those who wish to be great in God’s Kingdom must be servants; those who wish to be first must be “slave of all.” (Mark 10:43) A slave is even less than a servant. Slaves have no agency. A slave occupies the lowest place in conventional society, virtually unseen and unheard. However, it is in this lowest place that we find Jesus. This seems to be the whole, confounding trajectory of Jesus’ life: to *always* go lower—into hell if necessary.

I think we have to take last week’s Gospel reading together with today’s in order to see the whole picture. Last week Jesus tells his disciples that they must be servants: to one another and to those to whom they minister. Jesus models this in the Gospel of John when he ties a towel around his waist and proceeds to wash their feet. If the disciples truly want to be with Jesus as Jesus’ partners, that is the path they must take. They are, after all, now on the way to Jerusalem, on the way to the cross. Over and over, Jesus calls those whom the rest of society chooses to ignore and not to hear. They are of all genders, all physical conditions, all ages, all levels of prosperity and lack thereof.

This week we see someone who has had to live at the margins—who is literally sitting at the side of the road—able to leap to his feet, not only fully restored, but called to be a disciple. The one who “shouts out” for mercy is “called” by Jesus. I was intrigued to learn that the Greek word for “shout out” is also used for the crowing of roosters. Can we allow Bartimaeus’ cries to be our wake-up call? As Jesus says in the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” (Matthew 5:7) As that beautiful hymn goes: “There is a wideness in God’s mercy, like the wideness of the sea. There’s a kindness in God’s justice that is more than liberty...”

Once we are awake with our eyes and ears open, can we have the courage to throw off our cloaks, or whatever it is that keeps us from seeing Jesus face-to-face? Two weeks ago, for the rich young man, it was all his possessions. In exchange, Jesus offers him freedom and discipleship. The young man already has Jesus’ love. I’d like to think that eventually the young man has the courage to follow. And just think, by sharing his possessions, he could bring others along with him! Last week, for the disciples, it was whatever status they imagine is conferred with discipleship. What Jesus asks instead is servanthood. In today’s Gospel Jesus asks the disciples to call someone else to him, someone who, unlike the rich young man, has no qualms about throwing off his cloak.

The healing of the blind beggar is Jesus' last healing act in Mark before setting his sights on Jerusalem. I hear it as a foreshadowing of the resurrection. Jesus has now shown us the complete picture of God's Kingdom and our place in it, with himself at the still center—however upside-down it may seem. In simple terms, "...Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." (Mark 10:30-31) Yet we are all invited: with God's help we're all going to get there. Niggling at the back of my mind this week is a song that illustrates what Jesus is teaching. It's the Song of Mary, the Magnificat. Perhaps if James and John had just listened more closely to Jesus' mother...

My soul proclaims your greatness, O God,
and my spirit rejoices in you, my Savior.
For you have looked with favor
upon your lowly servant,
and from this day forward
all generations will call me blessed.
For you, the Almighty, have done great things for me, and holy is your Name.
Your mercy reaches from age to age
for those who fear you.

You have shown strength with your arm;
you have scattered the proud in their conceit; you have deposed the mighty from
their thrones and raised the lowly to high places.
You have filled the hungry with good things, while you have sent the rich away
empty.
You have come to the aid of Israel your servant, mindful of your mercy –
the promise you made to our ancestors –
to Sarah and Abraham
and their descendants forever.

Inclusive Bible translation

