

Glen Ridge Congregational Church
October 25, 2009; Mark 10: 46-52 – Chapel only
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

“What do you want me to do for you?” What a question that is: it sounds so simple, doesn’t it. But I’m not so sure it’s as easy to answer as it seems – how many times has someone asked you that and you stop to think and have trouble coming up with an answer. Sometimes it’s relatively easy but often we’re so overwhelmed that we really don’t know what we want, what we need, or what would be most helpful. We may not even know where to start.

Or maybe we’re hesitant to say what it is we really want – maybe it feels too selfish, too self-centered. Maybe we think what we want can’t or won’t happen without a miracle and we’ve accepted somehow that it, whatever the “it” is, won’t ever come to pass, so why bother. Why set ourselves up for such a great disappointment. Or, we convince ourselves that we’re not worth it anyway, and we’ve lived this long without “it” so why rock the boat.

Or maybe even worse, we’ve given up. What’s the use? I can’t change this situation. I’m trapped. Or deep down, I really don’t want to change – my life is familiar, comfortable, stable – I get through the day all right. I can cope, things are OK. I don’t really want to start over. I’m too old. I’m too set in my ways. What would my family think? What would the neighbors, the co-workers think?

The story of Bartimaeus: the blind man who Jesus healed. We remember that story from our Sunday School days – another in a series of healings by Jesus on his way to Jerusalem. But this story is different – really quite different.

The person healed here has a name – Bar-Timeaus, son of Timeaus – Mark even underscores that for us. Why is this person named when most people healed in the gospel miracle accounts are not? Perhaps this is a clue to what discipleship is all about – perhaps his name was preserved because Bartimaeus told his story as he followed Jesus on the way. Perhaps his healing, his journey to wholeness continued after his sight was restored. Discipleship is about healing, call, response, and then telling the story, isn’t it. Disciples are called to spread the good news – to evangelize.

How was Bartimaeus healed? Not by Jesus’ physical touch – remember the blind man in Bethsaida who Jesus healed by the laying on of his hands? Well, Bartimaeus was healed by the word – by the emphasis on faith. The relationship between faith and healing is important here: your faith has made you well.

This story teaches us about faith – it redefines faith, I think, into an action. Belief, faith, creates an action. A behavior. Because of our faith we do something. Bartimaeus did something created by his faith.

Another difference in this story: the man from Bethsaida was told not to go into the village following the healing, not to tell how he’d been healed. There’s none of that in this story. Why?

Blind Bartimaeus is sitting by the roadside begging in Jericho. It’s a small town – people have known each other all their lives. There’s nothing else for Bartimaeus to do =

nothing else for any blind people to do at that time. Just sit there begging. There was no training, no welfare for the disabled, simply the mercy of people passing by. Picture him sitting there – his mantle – or his cloak, draped across his lap. Maybe there was a hollow in the center to receive coins thrown by passersby. Making a hollow so he could reach in and feel the coins – then he could gather them and put them into his pocket. His life, if you will, was contained in that mantle draped across his lap.

Bartimaeus hears the crowd gather around him, feels their movement. Something exciting is happening, but he can't see what it is. The people around him have known him for years – some are sympathetic, some indifferent, some openly hostile. But some of the neighbors tell him what the commotion is: Jesus of Nazareth is passing by. What do you suppose Bartimaeus has heard about Jesus?

Here's the blind man – in the midst of a crowd – he can't run because he can't see. He can't walk because the crowd is so thick – he might get trampled.

So what does he do? He reacts as though he's been waiting for the coming Jesus. He takes a deep breath and he shouts. Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me. He shouts louder and louder above the din of the crowd – he doesn't stop. Even when those standing by him rebuke him, try to silence him, shout over him telling him to be quiet. In fact then he yells even louder – on that dusty road, with all the noise of people and animals – it must have been a great voice that reached over all that noise and caused Jesus to stop, to stand still.

How must Bartimaeus have felt? What do you think?

And Jesus in the midst of all that hears the words that really matter – Jesus Christ, Son of David – have mercy on me.

Words that reach Jesus and make him stop, stand still. Like the touch on his garment by a woman in pain. Like the cry of the children who have been pushed away. Jesus stops. Jesus hears the cry and responds. Call him here. So the kindhearted in the crowd open a path and tell Bartimaeus – take heart. Get up. He is calling you.

What comforting words – take heart. The Lord has heard your cry. Take heart – your prayer is heard by the Lord. Take heart – you are no longer alone. No longer the despised, ignored, patronized person begging by the roadside. Take heart. You matter. You are no longer an outsider.

And now the moment for Bartimaeus is here. It's quiet. All eyes are on him. He can't see it, but he's the center of attention. He's been crying out – he's finally been heard. Someone is listening! Jesus is listening. The famous one who has healed before. He's here. And he's listening to me! What does Bartimaeus do?

No, he doesn't sit back and shake his head – it's not important. You're busy – I'm just a beggar. You have more important things to do. He doesn't back off. No – that's not what he does.

He throws off his mantle – his cloak, and springs up. He goes through the clear path to Jesus. The hollow in the mantle disappears – the coins go flying everywhere. His whole life as he knew it is gone as he jumps up from that sitting position and he goes to Jesus. A decisive moment in his life. A moment when he throws off what he has been and walks into a new, different future.

Have you ever had such a moment in your life when you threw off your mantle and went to Jesus?

Jesus looks directly at Bartimaeus. Again, nobody else in the crowd exists – just Jesus and Bartimaeus. And Jesus asks him, what do you want me to do for you. Jesus asks him to name what it is that is holding him back. What do you want? What do you need? What is your deepest desire?

In other places, at other times Jesus asks his disciples the same question – but they couldn't answer it. But Bartimaeus does. A simple request: Teacher, let me see again.

Now, it's obvious from these words that Bartimaeus wasn't blind from birth – let me see again. And he has no doubt that Jesus is the one to give him back his sight.

Bartimaeus is persistent! Annoyingly so from the point of view of the crowd – is Jesus asking a foolish question? What do you want? Of course Bartimaeus wants his sight back – how else would he respond? But Jesus asks us, and Bartimaeus to name what it is he, we want.

Would we dare to cry out our need if it was as great as Bartimaeus? It's possible to think of him asking for something he had no right to ask for – his request was so audacious – to regain his sight! Outrageous – out of the question. His answer may be obvious – but to ask for something that seems impossible? Such an unreal expectation here.

But is it? Perhaps that's what faith is – an expectation that what you really want, really need, will happen. An expectation that by asking for what you really want, may lead you into taking an action that's risky – to throw off the mantle and change the usual behavior. Faith is an action – it leads to action, to taking risks, to making changes, to going and standing before Jesus, expressing prayer, persistently, plainly, honestly.

The healing of Bartimaeus is a testimony to the power of Jesus to restore, make well, save, those who know they are blind. Those who know they are blind. Those who dare to cry out their deepest need.

I hear people talk about prayers not answered. I wonder if those prayers are not truly the cries of our deepest needs – I wonder if the pain of expressing our deepest needs stops us from doing that. I wonder if we've stopped believing in miracles, if we've stopped crying out because the noise of the crowd is so overwhelming. Because nobody seems to care, to listen. Or because we think our deepest need is so audacious that it can't be met. I wonder if some of our prayers are about what we think we want, not what we know we need. I've had wonderful conversations with folks around this – God listens to and hears our prayers and does answer them. But we don't always hear or know, the answer because maybe it's not what we want to hear. God gives us what we need, not necessarily what we want. And Bartimaeus teaches us that we have to do the work of knowing what it is we need. What it is we honestly, deep down, need. That's hard work, isn't it. And he teaches us to be persistent in that work. And he teaches us not to censor those deep needs we have. Is anything impossible with God? Absolutely not. Bartimaeus teaches us to take risks, to talk over the crowd. To talk against the crowd. In spite of indifference, even hostility, remember – there were kind souls in the crowd who made the path for him to approach Jesus. And Bartimaeus teaches us that we're not alone. Even in the midst of a noisy and unruly crowd, Jesus heard, saw, healed him.

I hear people say that their need is not so great compared to others they know. But that's not the point, is it. Bartimaeus, supposedly a blind, worthless beggar. One man in a huge crowd. A heart that longs for mercy, and the Son of God responds to this longing. That response is available to Bartimaeus, to you, to me. We're not alone. None

of us is alone. None of us is unimportant. None of our deepest needs, our deepest wants is unimportant. We all matter.

Bartimaeus gets his wish. He asks and he is answered. He knocks and the door is opened. Jesus calls him to himself and Bartimaeus jumps at the chance. And after he expresses his wish, Jesus tells him, as he has said to so many others, go – your faith has made you well. Can you imagine more wonderful words than these?

No time passes. The question is asked, the request is granted, and the sight is regained. Jesus tells him to go. But Bartimaeus stays with him. He stays with the crowd. He cannot be away from the source of his light. He is ready to follow Jesus from now on.

We don't know what happens to him after this. We don't know if he went all the way to Jerusalem to witness the triumphant entry, the agony of the passion. It is possible that, when the time came, he was one of the first Christians. Mark simply tells us that he regained his sight and followed him on the way. On the way – code in the Bible for the early church.

Let us also turn to the God of all lights and receive the sight that makes us to see the Son of God in all his compassion and mercy. And let us follow on the way, never falling by the wayside. Because, as this story assures us, in the midst of a great crowd, each one of us, however small, poor, despised, matters to Jesus. We too, can cry out, Jesus Christ, Son of David, I want to see again.

Bartimaeus did. So can we. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Let us pray:

You would do great things for us, O God, and we are glad. You would save us from ourselves to be your own people. You would call us away from the world's self serving agenda. You would open eyes that are blinded by self concern.

Now help us, gracious teacher, to view the world through the eyes of faith. Draw us once more into that relationship of trust that will enable us to live with confidence. In the midst of our weeping, bring consolation. In the face of losses, restore in us the awareness of spiritual riches you offer for our claiming. Equip us as planters and harvesters in your realm.

May our ears hear the cries of those who suffer. May our hands reach out to those in need. May this company of your people dare to live as a saved and saving people. May we embrace those higher values that lift us from being entertained to being involved. We would follow Jesus in humble daring service. We would take risks of sharing good news. We would be quiet healers and joyous celebrants of all that you make possible. Lead us, O God, through another week. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen