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Job 42: 1 – 6, 10 – 17
 Hebrews 7: 23 – 28

Ps. 34: 1 – 8, (19 – 22)
 Mark 10: 46 – 52

“What is it that you want me to do for you?”

The Son of David poses this question to the son of Timaeus. It is a question with the power to be life-changing. It is a question that is familiar. We just heard it last week when James and John approached Jesus about him doing for them whatever they asked. Bartimaeus’ response to the question could not be more different from that of the brothers. So, let’s look at Bartimaeus more closely.

In all four Gospels combined, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, there are about thirty different healing stories. It’s a little hard to know the exact number because there are some which might be duplicates. According to the Rev. Dan Clendinen, among these healing stories, there are three distinct stories in which Jesus heals a blind man:

1. In Matthew 9, Jesus heals two blind men by touching their eyes.
2. In Mark 8 and John 9, Jesus uses his spit, his saliva, to heal a blind man. In John’s version, a discussion follows about spiritual blindness.
3. And then, in a story that occurs in Matthew 20, Luke 18 and Mark 10 (what we hear today), Jesus heals a blind man at Jericho. Once again in Matthew’s version, there are two men healed.

Now in all thirty or so healing stories, the person or persons being healed are never named. They’re all anonymous. Except in this story, where we hear about Bartimaeus [and only in Mark’s version]. And in all of these stories, the miraculous healing is not really the point. Every healing is meant to draw attention to the deeper mystery of who Jesus really is. What all of the healings point to is that Jesus is more than a magician. He is the one foretold by the prophet Isaiah, that when God shall redeem Israel, the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped and the lame shall leap like deer. Not everyone – perhaps most especially the twelve disciples closest to Jesus – can see or perceive that yet. . But Bartimaeus, despite his physical blindness, can see that quite clearly.

Bartimaeus is an interesting name for the evangelist, Mark, to single out. Mark tells us parenthetically that it means “son of Timaeus.” We don’t know who Timaeus is, but the fact that Bartimaeus is actually named may mean that he is someone known in the early church to whom Mark writes. But more than that, Bartimaeus is a hybrid name – part Aramaic and part Greek. “Bar” is Aramaic for “son of.” Timaeus comes from the Greek and means “honorable.” So Bartimaeus’ name means “son of honor,” or an honored person. Which is more than a little ironic given his station in life as a blind person, sitting in the dust by the side of the road, begging and waiting for people to toss a coin into the cloak he has spread out before him. Bartimaeus is *not* honored. But Mark is saying loud and clear that Bartimaeus *is* a person to be honored.

Mark may also be having a little more fun with Bartimaeus’ name. If you are or were a philosophy student, then the name Timaeus might be familiar. *Timaeus* is the title of Plato’s most famous dialogue, and the name of the narrator. In *Timaeus*, Plato (who lived 400 years or so before Jesus) contrasts “seeing” in the physical sense with “blindness” to Eternal Truths. This is not unlike all four evangelists who contrast those who *think* they see but who really don’t get Jesus or his message – namely folks like the Pharisees, scribes AND disciples – with those who are usually on the margins of

society and who cannot physically see but who *do* get Jesus. David Runia, a classicist [*Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato*], posited that “Timaeus was the only work of Greek prose that up to the third century AD, every educated man could have been presumed to have read.” Might that include Mark? We don’t know. But Bartimaeus, in response to Jesus’ question, cries out, “Rabbouni, I want to see!” It becomes the physically, literally blind leading the spiritually, figuratively blind.

It’s also interesting that “Rabbouni” is the word that Mark records on Bartimaeus’ lips. The Aramaic word is only used one other place in the Gospels, and that is on the lips of Mary Magdalene as she turns and recognizes the man she had thought was the gardener as the resurrected Jesus. Rabbouni, like the much more common “Rabbi,” means teacher. But it is used with a special deference, with a loving respect and reverence. And that gives us, perhaps, a deeper insight in hearing Bartimaeus’ words.

Something else which Bartimaeus says is also very interesting. He boldly calls out to Jesus, “Son of David!” Up until this point in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus has not encouraged anyone to use this terminology. It’s a messianic title and indicative of Bartimaeus’ ability to see what others cannot. It’s a dangerous title, because if enough people use it, then those in authority may get alarmed. But there is great significance in Jesus allowing Bartimaeus to proclaim this title now. This by-the-side-of-the-road healing is the bridge between all that has transpired in Jesus’ teaching and ministry and Jerusalem which lies about twenty miles travel hence. The very next passage in Mark is Jesus’ triumphal entry, with donkey and palm boughs, into Jerusalem for the last time. The people will be calling out, “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor, David!”

There is also an arc in Mark’s storyline that is important. This healing of a blind man and the one back in chapter 8 are like bookends on the segment about the spiritual blindness of the disciples. It begins with Jesus’ seemingly frustrated comment to the disciples in the boat, “Can’t you see with your two good eyes? Can’t you hear with your two good ears?” [N. T. Wright] Then, in between the two healings, Jesus attempts three times to prepare his disciples for what is coming in Jerusalem, and three times they misunderstand or don’t want to hear what he is saying.

First, Peter, after recognizing Jesus as the Messiah, denounces what Jesus says because it doesn’t fit with his vision of messiahship. Then after Jesus’ second attempt, all the disciples argue about who is the greatest. And finally, James and John want to be in the positions of honor at either side of Jesus in his Kingdom. Then there is Bartimaeus, ‘son of honor,’ waiting alongside the road that leads to Jerusalem, who – unlike Jesus’ closest followers – understands what God is doing in and through this itinerant rabbi. As someone has quipped [Richard Swanson], “You get the impression he sees quite a lot for a blind man.”

Yes, Bartimaeus is a man not only to be honored but to be emulated. He is a man who knows what he needs and is not afraid to shout out for it. He will not be cowed by the nay-sayers. Bartimaeus is an active participant in his own transformation. As opposed to the rich man who didn’t want to give away everything he had in order to follow Jesus, Bartimaeus instantly springs up, and casts away his only possession and means of livelihood, his cloak, and whatever few coins might be on it. There’s a good chance that if he isn’t healed by Jesus that he will not be able to find his cloak again, or perhaps others will have claimed it. But Bartimaeus seems to give that no thought. He understands what waits with potential, not only for him, but for all of Israel.

Mark first describes Bartimaeus as sitting by the wayside. And the last we hear of the now healed man is that he follows Jesus on the way. Out of all those thirty or so healings, this is the only recorded instance of the healed person following Jesus. We don't know what happens to Bartimaeus after this. "The Way" can be understood in at least two senses. It can mean literally following Jesus down the dusty road ahead. It might also mean following the teachings of Jesus, because the early Christian movement was first known as "The Way." So, does Bartimaeus go to Jerusalem and personally witness the triumphant entry procession? Does he take part in the last supper? Does he watch in agony as Jesus is tried, crucified and buried? Does he then come back to Jericho and begin to put into practice the things Jesus taught? We have no idea. But whatever he does, it must be pretty remarkable for Mark to use him as such a model.

Bartimaeus' actions have been described as "one of the most startling, spine-tingling displays of faith in all of Scripture," right up there with Abraham and Sarah leaving Ur, or Moses returning to Egypt to help free the Hebrew slaves, or Mary's response to the angel, Gabriel. [Henry King Ohmig, *Synthesis* 2009] How can you and I begin to live more closely into the model that Bartimaeus sets for us? How do we live into *our* faith like that? Imagine for a moment Jesus standing right in front of you, asking you "What do you want me to do for you?" What do you say? And how will you follow?

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