

Sermon

Proper 25B October 27, 2024

Mark 10:46-52

The Gospel of Mark has been described as a Passion Narrative with a really long introduction. This description plays out when you realize that close to 40 percent of this gospel is dedicated to the Passion narrative – Palm Sunday to Easter. I bring this up because for the past few weeks Jesus has been on his way to Jerusalem, and today that journey continues as he and the disciples find themselves in Jericho.

Today's story of Jesus' encounter with the blind beggar, Bartimaeus, is the last story of the introduction. It's the last story before he rides into Jerusalem on the donkey, kicking off Holy Week. Bartimaeus is the last person in Mark to receive a healing miracle from Jesus. And Bartimaeus is the last person to follow Jesus, making him the last person in the gospel to choose to follow Christ. This final story before Jesus enters Jerusalem is strategically placed to counteract the two stories that immediately precede this one.

Two weeks ago we heard the story of the rich man who came to Jesus and asked, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" which led to a discussion about following the Commandments and a harder request to sell all he had, give the money to the poor, and then follow Jesus. "And he went away grieving for he had many possessions"

Last week we heard about James and John asking Jesus to grant that they should sit on his right and left when he comes into his glory. That led to Jesus teaching about godly leadership. You want to be great? Become a servant. You want to be first? Become a slave. This is a completely different way of seeing leadership and power. It's a completely different way of seeing than how the world sees.

Today, in this final encounter before Jesus enters Jerusalem, we hear about Bartimaeus, a blind man who sat by the roadside begging for food or coins on which he could live. The road from Jericho to Jerusalem was well-traveled (see Luke 10 and the parable of the Good Samaritan), so it may have provided a decent living for ol' Bart, but not so well that he could stop begging.

As we heard, Jesus is going from Jericho to Jerusalem. Blind Bartimaeus hears that it's Jesus passing by and calls out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" He is

the only person in the Gospel of Mark to use that particular messianic title for Jesus. The crowd, however, tries and fails to silence him, as he cries out even louder. Eventually Jesus hears him and calls him over; at which point he jumps up like Grandpa Joe in Willy Wonka, throws off his cloak, and is escorted to Jesus.

“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asks.

“My teacher, let me see again,” he replies. Immediately he regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way.

As I said, this story is strategically placed after the stories of the rich man looking to inherit eternal life, and that of James and John looking for seats of power, and before Jesus enters Jerusalem. And here’s why.

First, we have the story of the rich man. His concern is with inheriting eternal life, so he comes to Jesus to ask the question. Jesus recites the Law: Don’t murder; don’t commit adultery; don’t steal; don’t defraud; don’t bear false witness; etc. When he claims he’s done all that, Jesus tells him to sell everything and then follow. And the man goes away because he had many possessions.

Contrast that story with the one we just heard. Bartimaeus was blind, so that limited his career choices. He was a beggar because that’s the only job he could perform – sitting by the side of the road begging for money and/or food. Chances are he was homeless because he didn’t make enough money to buy a house or even rent a room. Living wherever he could find shelter, his cloak was his only possession. And yet, when Jesus calls him, he throws off his cloak.

The rich man, when called by Jesus to get rid of his possessions and follow can’t do it. The poor man, whose only possession is a cloak, willingly gets rid of it when called by Jesus.

Second is the issue of blindness. Blindness can be a physical condition, but it can also be used as a metaphor for ignorance or not being able to understand. In today’s gospel it means both. Bartimaeus has a physical condition that makes him unable to see. But, as I said earlier, blind Bartimaeus is the only character in Mark’s gospel to use the messianic title “Son of David” about Jesus. This makes him the only character in Mark’s gospel able to see what others could not.

Contrast this with James and John. “Teacher, we want you to grant us to sit at your right and your left when you come into your kingdom.” They had been following Jesus for three years and were unable to see what Jesus was all about. Although physically able to see, they were spiritually blind.

Bartimaeus sees what the disciples can't.

There's one final piece here. The rich man comes to Jesus asking about eternal life because he sees Jesus as a man of power who can make that happen. James and John ask about sitting on Jesus' right and left because they see him as a man of power ruling in glory. Bartimaeus is different.

Bartimaeus follows Jesus after tossing aside his only possession and regaining his sight. And where does he follow Jesus? He follows him on the way. On the way to where? Not to power and glory, but to Jerusalem where he will take up his cross, be executed, and buried.

The story of Bartimaeus is more than just the last encounter of Jesus before entering Jerusalem and his Passion. The story of Bartimaeus ends this section of Mark with a call for us to let go of possessions that keep us from following Christ and to see with new eyes.

As we go forward, the question we need to ask ourselves is this: Which of these three stories are we following?

Amen.