

“The View from the Curb”

October 24, 2021 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

A homily offered by Rev. Daniel Smith

The Lesson: Mark 10: 46-52

My dear college friend Randy and his son Ty have been visiting this weekend. We've been sharing memories and laughs. At one point, we found ourselves recalling to Ty a favorite mid 90's TV cartoon, Ren and Stimpy. We'd watch it together late-night or for study breaks in our dorms. An especially memorable and oft-quoted scene flashed to our minds. It was of the lean, haggard, mean-spirited and hilariously Eastern European accented main character Ren, who at one point finds himself laying down to sleep. In an entirely out-of-character move, he decides he should try praying, so he gets down on his knees, elbows on the bed, crosses his boney fingers, takes a deep and earnest breath and says, “Dear God, please give me million dollars and huuuge pectoral muscles. Amen.”

Suffice it to say, visiting college friends and sermon prep don't always mix but Ren's line reminded me of at least one possible answer to the deceptively simple question Jesus asks in our text for today. The question is this: “What do you want me to do for you?”

He may well know the answer for Bartimaeus let alone for us, but I love he assumes nothing, but instead asks and listens. I'd like to invite us to imagine it for ourselves for starters, as a way into this text, to sit with it for a moment and see what it provokes. Close your eyes, and imagine Jesus asking you, right here right now? “What do you want me to do for you?”

Go ahead, be honest. Is it a million dollars? Or early retirement? Is it to take away some pain or anxiety or weight you've been carrying?

Think about it. Better yet try praying about how you'd answer. What do you want me to do for you?

Is it relief from relief from some regret or another chance at a failed whatever? Is it restoration of or assurance of health for yourself or a loved one? Maybe you're led beyond yourself and your circle to something larger. Maybe it's for some divine knowledge that our democracy will hold, or that our planet will one day heal? Maybe you could use some clarity about a big decision, or maybe you want Jesus to start telling you what to do, to be a better person, partner, parent, child, friend, or what to do to find justice, peace, and joy ?

What is it? Remember, in this little spiritual exercise, it's Jesus asking. It could be anything. And he's speaking it right from our text.

If you are still struggling to land something, maybe you are still surprised by the question itself, because you've spent most of your life discounting your spiritual needs and wondering what you can do for others? We can come back to all this but first let's see how the exchange plays out for Bartimaeus.

Blind Bartimeaus, God love him. He seems clear from the start, even before the question is asked. We think we know what he wants so much that we may skip right over what he asks for even before Jesus notices him. First, he says, Son of David, have mercy on me! When I hear this, I wonder why he's

called Blind Bartimaeus in the first place. Sure, he can't see at the start of the story, but his audacity to press through the shushing crowd, his persistence in crying out, and then the sheer depth of what he asks for first? Why not call him Bold Bartimaeus or Wise Bartimaeus? To ask Jesus for mercy, to give him a little grace, acceptance or love. I wonder if mercy was on any of our lists?

As scholars have noted, the word mercy is important here. In New Testament Greek, the word is *eleō*, as in *Kyrie Eleison*. Lord have mercy! But in a first century Hebrew translation, and so more like the language being spoken by Jesus and Bartimeaus, the word is *hesed*. *Hesed* means loving kindness, and it also carries deep connotations of covenantal and communal love and loyalty. Thus, “Bartimaeus seeks not just mercy[nor pity], but a sign of *hesed* and to be welcomed into the covenantal community.”¹ For starters, at least, he wants to belong. He wants to be part of something larger. He wants to move from his self or other imposed margins into a community of faith and purpose and he knows Jesus gets this.

Still, once Bartimeaus has his attention, Jesus doesn't assume anything. He doesn't assume that Bartimaeus wants to belong, or even that he wants to be made able to see. He doesn't assume that Bartimaeus thinks of his blindness as a disability. He doesn't impose any strategies or problem solving. Instead, Jesus asks first and then listens. What do you want me to do for you? With compelling self-awareness and agency, Bartimaeus' answer is at once predictable yet remarkably profound in that it points to a universal path of deepening spiritual insight: “Teacher, let me see again.” Let's take a cue from Jesus and not assume we know what he means.

I think this story is about several things. Yes, it is more than fair to say it's about Jesus' power to heal and to give physical sight to those who cannot see. It's also about the faith of one who knows what he needs and who has the *chutzpah* to ask for it! It is about a fundamental call of Jesus to all of us to draw near to him. More than anything, I wonder if it's about Jesus giving not only new sight just to Bartimeaus, but new sight and insight and new perspective to his disciples as well. You see, in Jesus' presence, all are empowered to see things differently, and to see things that they could not see before, and to see people they could not see before, including Bartimaeus himself.

So, the story for sure puts Jesus' question to all of us. Yet it also invites us to cast aside whatever cartoonish or surface answers may first arise and to make Bartimaeus' response our own. “Teacher let me see again,” “Let me see again, as if for the very first time!” As in, please, Lord, give me a new perspective, a deeper and more faithful way of looking at my life, the world and all its problems.

Can't we relate to this need to see the world with new and fresh eyes? Given all our eyes have seen and can't unsee, can't we all use a new lens, some restored vision as we ponder the immensity of all that we are holding now? I don't know about you but for me, it's refreshing even to consider the possibility that how I now see the world may be entirely different from how God or Jesus sees the world, even and especially in these times that can feel so dire. What's more, how Jesus-like of this story that we would be invited to see things not from our, let's face it, perches of relative privilege, but to see things and ask the question from the perspective from one who is wholly marginalized, from a blind beggar who sees things far more clearly than the rest of Jesus's followers .

A few weeks ago, we were joined for an after-church discussion led in part by a Wampanoag from Mashpee named *gkisedtanamoogk*. By virtue of two subtle yet powerful phrases, he's introduced me and

¹ Ron Allen and Clark Williamson, [*Preaching the Gospels without Blaming the Jews*](#), p. 160.

several of us to a new way of seeing. He says, in essence, that by virtue of living in this country, almost all of us have been given the “view from the boat” (e.g., the Mayflower), but he invites people instead to try to imagine the “view from the shore.”² The view from the boat. The view from the shore. Let that sink in for a moment. It underscores how we’ve all however unwittingly acquired colonialist perspectives, an English language and English places names “from the boat.” We’ve also acquired sometimes ingenious yet often extractive and exploitative practices, from the boat. Even the view and vision of “this land is your land, and this is my land” comes from the boat. But what of the view from the shore, a view that may say that “This land is.” Period. What of the view from the people that were here first and that are still here in our midst. I see a similar invitation to see the world anew in our text for today.

Another even more recent example comes to mind from a few conversations I had yesterday after Eric Riedel’s memorial service wherein we celebrated the gift of Eric’s always grateful perspective on his life and health. His cardiac surgeon shared how Eric helped him and his colleagues to see something new about what is the true measure of health. It’s not something that can be measured by medical tests alone. Health according to Eric is also about whether someone feels loved and surrounded by care and affection by the community. Health can come not only from the latest treatments but from whether someone is accorded genuine respect and agency and dignity despite whatever their condition. Call it the view from the hospital bed.

Whether it's taking a view from a bed or a shore or a Jericho roadside, or from whatever margins, what a world transforming gift to be able to see the world with new eyes, and to question our insider, know-it-all ideas. Bartimaeus' response to Jesus' question “What do you want me to do for you?” may be exactly the answer we all need. Teacher, help me to see again.

Surely the experience of new sight is common to us all at birth, when we come out seeing color patches and curious about what doesn’t yet have names or meaning, but unfortunately, we have forgotten it. Somewhere between being a child and young adult, says the Canadian singer and writer Leonard Cohen, “as one's eyes grow accustomed to sight, we armor ourselves against wonder.” But imagine the wonder of seeing the world through the eyes of a child, or of a truly grateful man who happens to have a terminal illness, or imagine that view from the shore, before any so called “first encounters”, what age-old wisdom it bears, or imagine the perspective of Bold Bartimaeus.

What happens next for him can be the same for us, if we let it. For Jesus heals, reorients and restores our perspective and then he does tell hi, what to do, again giving him utter agency! He tells Bartimaeus to go, because his faith has made him well, but Bartimaeus has an even clearer picture of his next steps, and his vocation. He doesn’t go anywhere, instead he draws nearer to Jesus, and follows him the rest of his days. He knows he’s now called to bring and share this new vision and new depth or perspective to our world! For us, it may mean having eyes to see and ears to hear those people who are not gathered here with us today – those who might for whatever reason feel excluded by our ways of worship, our ways of dressing up, our ways of talking – those from different cultures, who speak different languages, those who are deaf, and blind, those who are differently-abled. It may mean seeing a world wherein hierarchies are overturned. What was once power and prestige to us, could be nothing but a mirage, a vain distraction! What was once our hard-earned security, whether financial or otherwise, could end up

² Hager, Shirley; Mawopiyane. *The Gatherings: Reimagining Indigenous-Settler Relations* (p. 244). Aevo UTP. Kindle Edition.

as nothing more than the cloaks on our backs. What was once last and least of all, could be first and greatest of all!

My prayer today is that God may grant to each of us some capacity to see the world anew. This perspective itself may be different for each of us depending on where we find ourselves on any given day. It may take some adjustment like when you get a new pair of glasses and suddenly you look down and see the ground as closer and clearer than you thought it was. By the grace of God, may we see ever more clearly and fulfill ever more fully our calling to be more loving, more whole and holy, more like Jesus. And when we hear the words that Bartimeaus heard “Go now, your faith has made you well”, may we step out into the world in wonder, look anew at the very ground of our faith upon which we can always stand. It too might be closer than you think. Amen.

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