

Making the Invisible Visible

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Texts: Jeremiah 31:7–9, Mark 10:46–52

When my brother was very little, he was often the first in our family to wake. So my mother had made a rule that he had to stay in his room until she was got out of bed. Of course he would get restless and long for freedom, and soon he would try to sneak out, feeling his way down the hallway with one hand on the wall and the other covering his eyes.

His two-year-old mind reasoned that if he couldn't see his parents, then they couldn't see him. So when he passed their open doorway, and my mother called out, "Hello, Philip!" he was flummoxed. How had she spotted him?

He hadn't figured out yet that not being able to see doesn't make someone invisible.

Or does it?

Jesus and his disciples are about a day's journey from Jerusalem, passing through the town of Jericho, surrounded by a large crowd.

Just outside the city gate, a commotion breaks out. A beggar at the side of the road is clamoring for his attention. Things haven't changed much in 2,000 years, so we know about beggars at roadsides. Most folks probably see them as a nuisance, if they see them at all. Unlike my baby brother, when you're that low-status, you're pretty well invisible.

The beggar in our story today doesn't even have a name, or not one that's come down to us. Mark calls him Bartimaeus, but then he goes on to add, in Greek, "the son of Timaeus," which is literally what bar-Timaeus means in Aramaic: it means "the son of Timaeus." Mark is simply translating. The beggar is Timaeus's son, but it seems no one has bothered to remember his given name: he's just the blind kid, the son of Timaeus, a family misfortune – unable because of his disability to work or marry or take part in civic life – and so we find him outside the bounds of the city, sitting by the side of road, reaching out a hand for aid as the world passes him by. But this time Bartimaeus does not intend to be passed by. He raises his voice and cries out, and cries out again. He refuses to be silenced.

"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Jesus stands still.

By now, if you've been following the gospel of Mark from the beginning, you've encountered many healing stories, and quite a few have been stories about people pushing past obstacles to get to Jesus. There's the story of the woman with the hemorrhage. The friends who take apart a roof to lower a paralyzed man down. There's the Syrophenecian woman who barges into a private house to ask a Jewish man to heal her daughter. And in a few more chapters, we'll encounter a woman who breaks all social taboos to approach Jesus and anoint him before his death.

None of these characters are given names either.

While the religious authorities are scandalized by him, while his own family think he's lost his mind, while his closest disciples misunderstand him and try to remake him into a figure of status and glory, to their own benefit... it's the low-status ones whose names we don't know, the outsiders, the hopeless, the ones who've exhausted all other possibilities and have nothing left to lose, who just want to get close enough to him to ask for his help. These are the ones Mark holds up to us as models of faithful discipleship.

"Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Now, Jesus could choose to step through the crowd and go and sit down in front of the blind man at the side of the road. But he doesn't do that. Instead he turns to the people around him, the same people who had tried to make Bartimaeus shut up a moment before. He says to them, "Call him here."

"And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.' So throwing off his cloak – literally the last thing he had to lose, his only possession of any value at all – throwing off his cloak he sprang up and came to Jesus."

And with that, the outsider, the man on the bottom of the status ladder, the ragged beggar at the side of the road, is led into the center, into the place of honor nearest Jesus, while the important people fall back, and wait to hear what Jesus will say. Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for you?"

Now, given the man's circumstances, you might think this an unnecessary question. But it's the very same question Jesus asked James and John a few verses back, when they came to him and said,

"Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

Now he asks Bartimaeus the same question. "What is it you want me to do for you?"

He says simply, "Teacher, let me see again."

The ironies are thick here. Jesus is surrounded by a large crowd of people, including his own closest disciples, and yet of all of them, only the blind man has recognized him for who he is. The others haven't yet begun to "see" him. Their eyesight is clear enough, but they lack inner sight. The beggar is blind, but with eyes of faith, he recognizes Jesus truly as God's anointed, the messenger of God's mercy to all.

Meanwhile, the people who are flocking around Jesus are the very same people trying to shut down the beggar at the side of the road. Which reminds me a bit of the people who vote blue in every election, then turn out in force to block any attempt to build subsidized housing in places where they might have to see it and be reminded that people like Bartimaeus exist. Out of sight, out of conscience.

"Call him here," Jesus says. And he brings the beggar back into the heart of the community. He doesn't tell him what he needs. He doesn't shame him or blame him or even give him advice. He says, "What do you want me to do for you?"

I'm guessing it's been a while since anyone has asked the son of Timaeus that question.

"Teacher, let me see again."

"Go," Jesus says. "Your faith has made you well." And he regains his sight, and follows Jesus on the way. In the language of the early church, that means he becomes a follower of Jesus, what today we would call a Christian.

Jesus comes offering healing. But to receive it, we have to come to a place of honesty about our human vulnerability. It's not about who is worthy or who is unworthy, who belongs or doesn't belong. Who has earned the right to dignity and security, and who hasn't. To be human is enough: a child of God like every other, each with our secret struggles: loneliness, longing for love, fear of failure, the marks of past hurts.

The beginning of healing is being able to cry out, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!"

Two-thirds of the way through the gospel of Mark, Jesus' own followers haven't yet begun to grasp this. They are still thinking of the world in terms of insiders and outsiders, dreaming of a time when their proximity to Jesus will bring them glory and honor.

They are, to use the metaphor of our passage today, too blind to recognize their own need for restoration and wholeness.

They are following Jesus with one hand on his shoulder, and the other covering their eyes – hoping their weaknesses will be invisible to him and everyone else.

And the community of Jericho? Flocking to Jesus, while ignoring the man stranded on the

side of the road, on the outskirts of the city... the one they have shrugged off, the one they have given up on. Not their problem.

“Call him here,” Jesus says to them. “He is one of yours. Bring him back into the middle of your community, and let God restore you all to wholeness together.”

“See,” God says through the prophet Jeremiah:

See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here.

This is God’s great re-gathering: the restoration of the separated, the lost, the rejected, the excluded, to the center of community life.

For a few hours every Friday at First Church in Cambridge, we try to get a glimpse of what it’s like to live out this reality. We open the Mason St. door to Margaret Jewett Hall, and welcome in a crowd with smiles and hugs. White-aproned volunteers dish out plates of delicious homemade food, prepared potluck-style by caring neighbors and reheated in our church kitchen. A member of our team hands out numbers to get into the Resource Room, where guests can find clothing, hygiene products, and other essentials. On one side of the Hall, a city employee works one-on-one with guests to try to help them find housing; on the other, a volunteer sits at her sewing machine, mending clothing items. A local artist leads an art workshop in the Chapel, while a member of our congregation offers physical therapy in Hastings Common. And this Friday the Cambridge Public Health Department will hold their annual vaccination clinic in the Library, offering free flu and COVID vaccines to guests and volunteers. For three hours a week, in the same spaces where church members gather to share fellowship, break bread together, attend workshops, and hold congregational meetings, we make space for genuine community, with our least advantaged neighbors at the center, in the places of honor. And everyone, everyone, guests and volunteers alike, leaves feeling better, and a little more human.

Because living in a fractured society is fracturing to our spirits: a refusal of God’s abundant grace poured out on all. In this season of re-gathering, it’s good to be reminded that re-gathering is God’s own holy work, and that it won’t be finished until everyone is brought back into the center.

Beloved, may our eyes and our ears and our hearts continue to open to what God is doing among us. May we take what we are learning about mercy here on Friday afternoons, and bring the spirit of that work out to our carefully zoned neighborhoods, waiting for God’s disruptive grace to break in and set them free. And to God be the glory, now and forever. Amen.