

“In the Blink of an Eye”
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Mark 10:46-52 Homily
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For Private Distribution Only

As happy as I am for Bartimaeus, this man whose vision returns after an encounter with Jesus, I have to admit, I'm also troubled by stories like this one. Not to be ungrateful, but what about all the other people out there whose prayers don't seem to have gotten them anywhere? Whose prayers have yielded no relief from the physical challenges they face, whatever they might be? What is this story supposed to say to them... to us?

First of all, it's vitally important to note that the words “heal” and “cure” aren't exact synonyms. Especially in a theological context. In the modern western world, we've tended to associate cures with medicine: doctors and hospitals, prescription medications and surgical procedures, biopsies and x-rays and MRIs. Yet more and more people are migrating to perspectives on health which embrace the whole person: mind, body, and spirit--which comes a lot closer to the kind of healing Jesus offered. But even this holistic-with-an-h approach to healing isn't anywhere near as wholistic (with a “w”) as the healing God holds out to us.

This one very short narrative has much to tell us about that. There's a whole lot more going on here than first meets the eye. I know for me, when I hear or read it, it's easy to get so focused on Bartimaeus that I can forget that there's anyone present but him and Jesus! Yet right in the first sentence we're told that Jesus was entering Jericho with his disciples. And, in the second sentence, that they're leaving Jericho with a large crowd, presumably made up of people they'd attracted while passing through Jericho... How could it be so easy--for me at least--to overlook throngs of people? Well, did you notice that not a single word is attributed to the disciples during this incident? They may as well have not even been there! ...And, as for the crowd, there were

no brave individuals who stood out as Bartimaeus did. They had no names, and they spoke as a single, amoeba like crowd voice that first, in response to Bartimaeus's pleas for mercy, said, "Shhh! Be quiet!" And then, once Jesus had acknowledged him, softened and said, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you."

Hmmm. What do you make of that? It's a pretty big shift for a crowd to make, isn't it? From writing a man off as unworthy of Jesus' compassion and theirs to encouraging and guiding him toward Jesus? From ordering him back into silence and oblivion to speaking tenderly, comforting and affirming him, "Take heart?" ...It's as if, with just three words from Jesus—"Call him here."—in their eyes Bartimaeus went from less than nobody to beloved child of God. Pretty miraculous, I'd say. Nothing short of a conversion.

Wait a second! Whose healing was this? ...You begin to see what I mean by wholistic-with-a-w!

Did you notice where Bartimaeus was when Jesus and the crowd first encountered him? Sitting by the roadside. Likely in a ditch. On the margins. Begging. And not just along any old road. But the road from Jericho to Jerusalem. Which you may recall from Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan was an extremely treacherous road. Listen to this modern day description from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

*I remember when Mrs. King and I were first in Jerusalem.
We rented a car and drove from Jerusalem down to Jericho.
And as soon as we got on that road I said to my wife, "I can see why Jesus used this as the setting for his parable."
It's a winding, meandering road.
It's really conducive for ambushing.
You start out in Jerusalem, which is about twelve hundred miles... above sea level.
And by the time you get down to Jericho fifteen or twenty minutes later, you're about twenty-two feet below sea level [actually 846 feet].
That's a dangerous road.*

*In the days of Jesus it came to be known as the "Bloody Pass."*¹

Suffice it to say, this was probably not prime begging territory. Not a place where many would dare to stop and tend to a man in need. In fact, passers by might well have suspected that someone like Bartimaeus--or the man left for dead in Jesus' parable--was faking it! Robbers disguised as victims! ...And so it's probably safe to assume that Bartimaeus, even among lowly beggars, was low in status. That his disability forced him to occupy the leftover, undesirable roads.

How would we feel about ourselves if we were reduced to these circumstances? Cold, hungry, wrapped in a cloak, and sitting in a ditch? Poor, blind, and friendless, even among our own vagrant peers? Religious people judge our blindness to be a punishment from God.

Pedestrians assume we're despicable con men and thieves. Do we have high self esteem?

...Doubtful. Do we wake up each morning feeling like beloved children of God? ...Pretty highly unlikely....And so, with all of this in mind, if we replay the opening scene again, how surprising is it that this man not just spoke, but literally shouted to Jesus from the ditch, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"? And that, even after a merciless crowd of people told him to shut up, he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"? Not just surprising, but maybe even miraculous? ...And that, as soon as he heard that Jesus was calling for him, he spontaneously threw off his cloak--his one possession and protection against the elements--threw that cloak off, sprang up, and went to Jesus? Perhaps even more miraculous?

...Is it possible Bartimaeus had already had everything he needed within him and just hadn't realized it? Persistence, faith, courage, clarity, vision? Unlike the crowd, Bartimaeus knew who

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parable_of_the_Good_Samaritan, October 28, 2012.

and for whom Jesus was. Unlike the disciples, Bartimaeus would not allow himself to be silenced in the face of a crowd's oppression and insensitivity.

...Truth be told, Bartimaeus may never have been the blind man in this story. Or even the person most in need of healing.

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Do you see all that has transpired here in little more than the blink of an eye? Do see what I mean about wholistic healing-with-a-w?

Jesus was not a healer of the Band-Aid variety. Neither is God. Sure, 20/20 vision alone would have significantly changed Bartimaeus's life. But it would have been a cure, rather than true healing. For true healing to occur, the pathologies of other peoples' assumptions and behaviors have to shift as well. For true transformation to take hold, cultural structures and norms have to be upended. From a liberation theology perspective, it was and is not enough for this one man, Bartimaeus, to be saved. The lives of all oppressed persons must be transformed and redeemed for all time. But even this is not enough. No, the lives of all people must be healed and made new...even and especially those of persons who have ignored the cries of the Bartimaeuses of this world, of persons who have overlooked--or undervalued--the wisdom and the gifts of the Bartimaeuses of this world.

I'm willing to bet that, one way or another, that covers all of us. At some point in each of our lives each of us has played or likely will play both of those roles—oppressed, differently abled or disempowered Bartimaeuses and empowered, temporarily abled accessory to Bartimaeus's plight. If accessory sounds like too strong a word, we need only remember the disciples' passive

silence. Some might break down those categories into winners and losers. But that's not God's economy. In God's economy there are neither winners nor losers; just beloved children.

As you go to the polls next week, as we as a church continue to reach out into our community and invite people in, I hope you will bear this in mind—both 1) the radical love and hospitality of God and Christ which we, as children of God, have inherited and 2) the very real possibility that everything we have assumed could be changed, transformed, and healed in just the blink of an eye.

Amen.