

Saint Columba's Episcopal Church
October 24, 2021 – 22 Pentecost
Mark 10:46-52 – Blind Bartimaeus
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning we heard one of those Gospel passages that immediately draw us into the action, the story of Jesus healing the blind beggar, Bartimaeus. The reading begins by giving us the location of the action. Jesus and his disciples had been in Jericho, just a few miles from Jerusalem. They were leaving Jericho, and they were on the way to Jerusalem. Being “on the way to Jerusalem” means being on the way to Jesus’ crucifixion.

Now, as they leave Jericho they are accompanied by a large crowd of people. This is Mark’s way of emphasizing an important point: what Jesus did, what Jesus said, and who Jesus was attracted people. They wanted to be near him, to be around him. And he was well-known. The blind beggar, Bartimaeus, only needed to hear the name of the person passing by on the road to join in the shouting and ask for Jesus’ help.

There are many accounts of Jesus healing people in Mark’s Gospel. Bartimaeus is unique in two ways. He is the last person healed in this Gospel. And he is the only person healed by Jesus who follows Jesus after his healing, who follows him on his way to Jerusalem.

Hearing that it was Jesus on the road, Bartimaeus begins to shout. He says, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” “Son of David” is a name for the Messiah. So, blind Bartimaeus “sees” who Jesus truly is, a healer and much more. Mark tells us that “many sternly ordered him to be quiet,” so apparently Bartimaeus’ shouting was quite loud. Telling him to be quiet, however, doesn’t work – Bartimaeus shouts “even more loudly.” Bartimaeus is persistent. Jesus told his followers to “keep asking.” Bartimaeus keeps asking and gets Jesus’ attention.

Jesus stops and asks the disciples to summon him. When Bartimaeus hears them say, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you,” he throws off his cloak and comes to Jesus. Bartimaeus was a blind beggar. His cloak may have been his only possession, his shelter. Leaving it behind in the crowd as he did probably meant losing it for good. Bartimaeus gives up all he has so that he can answer Jesus’ call. Do you remember our recent lesson about Jesus and the rich man, the man who had many possessions and could not give them up and follow Jesus?

Jesus asks Bartimaeus what he wants and Bartimaeus makes his request – “My teacher, let me see again.” Jesus grants the request, and he says to Bartimaeus what he has said to many of the people he has healed: “Go; your faith has made you well.” But instead of going, Bartimaeus follows Jesus, even to the cross.

I think we can learn a great deal from blind Bartimaeus. First of all, Bartimaeus placed himself on the road that Jesus was taking. Like Bartimaeus, we call Jesus “my teacher.” We regard ourselves as his pupils, his disciples. And we know much more than Bartimaeus did about Jesus’ path, his way of self-giving love, love for God and for God’s people. Are we placing ourselves on that road of love where we have a good chance of encountering Jesus?

When Bartimaeus heard that Jesus was calling him, he willingly left behind his cloak so that he could spring up and go to Jesus. In what ways are we like Bartimaeus in his readiness to answer the call of Jesus and to follow him? In what ways are we like the rich man who went away from Jesus, grieving, when he learned the cost of discipleship?

It was obvious to Jesus that Bartimaeus was blind. Yet he asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” He gave Bartimaeus the freedom to ask for what was most important to him. How would you answer if Jesus asked you, “What do you want me to do for you?” This is a question worth taking time to answer. What do you most want from the Lord? And when you know what that is, I think this lesson teaches us to shout out our request to God. Shout and shout. Persist. Keep asking, day and night, with faith that God will respond. Perhaps by granting what we ask. Perhaps by leading us to change our request. Perhaps with a deeper knowledge of God. Perhaps with the peace that passes all understanding.

I wonder if you have ever felt like Bartimaeus, shouting out your prayer to Jesus over and over again. I have, quite recently. I don’t usually tell personal stories in my sermons, but today I will because the story involves you.

Nearly two years ago I retired from the parish I had served for ten years, St. Giles’ Episcopal Church in Jefferson. By the time I left that parish I was deeply weary. It wasn’t my intention to stop doing priestly ministry, but I wanted and needed a rest. Then the pandemic hit, and churches were closed. My break from church went on for many months. I did other things – all the work involved in selling our house, having a new house built, living temporarily in rented space, and moving twice. I didn’t give much thought to my role in the church.

Some time after we were settled into our new home, I began to feel ready to work in the church again. I contacted Michael Ambler and Bishop Brown to discuss what I might do. My name was added to the diocesan Sunday supply list. At about this time I reconnected with a clergy friend whose husband was dying of cancer. She asked me to minister to him in the hospital and at home and then conduct his funeral. The situation was very sad, but I felt such joy and new life within my heart doing ministry again! That told me something important. My experiences as a supply priest varied. One Sunday I led worship attended by only one parishioner! But I didn’t feel discouraged. Again, that told me something important. Bishop Brown enthusiastically agreed that Jesus was indeed calling me.

This is where blind Bartimaeus comes into my story. I thought of him because of the way I prayed: “I want to work!” Over and over again that was the prayer of my heart. I tried being more sophisticated about it. You know, adding “but Your will be done,” and praying that if the way did not open for me to serve the church, God would use the gifts God had given me in another way. But my spontaneous prayer was always just “I want to work!” I didn’t shout out loudly in a crowd, but I did shout it in my car and at home alone and even, quietly, on my walks.

Then, Michael Ambler called and asked if I could fill in here on a Sunday in August, and I said “yes.” I loved being here in this beautiful worship space among friendly and engaged people. I then “dared” – that’s how it felt – to send in my application to your vestry. The call to serve as your priest feels like the answer to my simple and insistent “I want to work!” prayer. I feel so grateful to God, joyful and full of hope about this opportunity for us to minister together.

Prayer is mysterious, isn’t it? I don’t think we can truly comprehend how our prayer and God’s work in us and in the world interact. Was God answering my prayer to work again, like Jesus answered Bartimaeus’ request to see again? Or was it God who moved me to pray this way? Perhaps God moved Bartimaeus to shout for Jesus because he had a role to fill as Jesus’ disciple. St. Paul tells us that it is the Holy Spirit who moves us to pray. We may never know, but one thing we can be sure of. The Lord is calling us. So, like Bartimaeus, may we take heart and find healing and the road to life, the road of following Jesus on his path of love. Amen.