

## April 8 – Bartimaeus – Persistence Pays Off

Mark 10:46-52

Recently, as I was reading again the Gospel accounts of Jesus ministry, I was struck by how many times the writers include brief encounters he had with people. Some of the people, like Bartimaeus, are named. Others are given a descriptive name such as the man with the withered hand. Over and over we have these recorded encounters, often not lasting more than a few minutes. I began to ask, “Why are they so important?” What was the writers of the Gospels trying to say through these moments? I am still not sure if I know completely the answers to those questions, but as I looked at these interactions anew, I realized that they were often shared to highlight an issue facing Jesus, or to celebrate one aspect of faith. During the next several weeks, I am inviting you to join with me as we examine some of these brief encounters. There is no way I can talk about all of them, there are way too many. I learned anew, through them, what the writers of the Gospel felt was important about Jesus’ ministry and some of the conflicts he was dealing with.

Today we begin with Bartimaeus. Many scholars believe that he must have become an early convert known to many in the church because we not only have his name, but we also learn that he is the son of Timaeus. We find him sitting with his begging bowl beside the main road leading from Jericho to Jerusalem when he hears a commotion. In asking those around him what was happening, he learns that the healer Jesus was coming down the lane. Bartimaeus must have earlier heard something about Jesus because he immediately begins to shout, “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me.” I find it interesting that he gives Jesus a messianic title. This was at a time when the Pharisees and others were trying to discredit Jesus. And even more interesting, he doesn’t ask to be healed, he asks for mercy. The crowd, instead of showing compassion, tries to silence him. He refuses to be quiet and, instead shouts all the louder. Jesus hears him above the tumult of the crowd and says, “Bring him here.” Bartimaeus, learning that he could meet Jesus, jumps up, throwing off his cloak and likely sending the begging bowl flying, runs as fast as he can to Jesus. Jesus asks him what he wants. He says that he wants to see and Jesus says his faith has made him

well. His faith was evidenced in his unwillingness to let the crowd silence him. His faith was on display because of his using a Messianic title for Jesus. His faith was on display through his belief that Jesus would show even a beggar mercy. This is a story about persistence paying off. It is a story about overcoming obstacles. It is a story about proclaiming what you believe. Jesus does not touch him as he does with some other healings. He just tells him to go, his faith has or will make him well. I imagine it this way. Bartimaeus turns, still blind, but with assurance. The crowd might have been silent, some might have smirked that all his shouting had gotten him empty promises. He believed Jesus. With each confident step, trusting Jesus words, his sight begins to clear. Just steps away he yells, "I can see!" And then, instead of going on his way, he turns and follows the crowd reminding all of his healing. He likely stayed with the group, going with Jesus to Jerusalem. It is not a long distance from Jericho to the Holy City. So, in my mind's eye this blind man's shouts of praise were the fuel that ignited all those around Jesus to start proclaiming, "Hosanna" and calling him the messiah, the son of David.

His story makes me ask: Where do we try to silence people's faith cries because they are inconvenient? Perhaps it is someone asking us a faith question that makes us uncomfortable, challenging us to really look at what we believe. We put them off, get angry with them or turn away. Many social justice issues are facing us today with people asking faith based questions around them. Sometimes we try to silence people because we want things the way they have always been. Other times we silence people because we just find their noise or questions inconvenient.

I recall serving a church that had a balcony. It was a small church, the balcony was not carpeted, and the sound from there echoed all over the church. The young people liked to sit up there and between their rustling feet and whispers it could be quite a distraction, especially before the service. Some had decided that the youth needed to be banned from the balcony. I knew it was going to come up at the next trustee meeting. That Sunday, just before church, I was standing at the back under the balcony and it was noisy. I could see some of our beloved elder women sitting rigidly in their spots, with frustration seeping out of every pore. I didn't need to see their faces to know

the looks of disgust. One of the matriarchs of the church suddenly leaned over to one of her seatmates and said in a deliberate stage whisper, "Do you hear that?" Her friend looked back as if she must be a little crazy and said, "Of course I hear that noise. Isn't it awful?" To which the first lady said, "Awful, no, life giving, absolutely. I think it is great we have children in church!" All the air went out of those rigid angry women. The noise had been framed in a new way and they knew if Lillian was not against the youth no one else would be. The item never came up at Trustees. Some wanted to silence and if they had been successful I believe several families would have left the church. We always have to guard our tongues and minds and ask, "Is God's Spirit at work in that commotion?"

By continuing to resist the crowd's attempts to silence his cries for help, Bartimaeus exhibits great faith in Jesus. He shows us that sometimes being persistence is also being faithful. Faith is often showing up, not being deterred and keeping our focus on what is important. God will always reward such persistent faith. It doesn't mean that they will always get their way, but they will ultimately be listened to because they haven't given up.

We don't always appreciate this persistent kind of faith. In fact we sometimes find it rather annoying. When someone keeps pushing, not willing to be silent or let it go, it is tough to be nice to them. Ultimately, this pushy kind of faith causes us to respond. We need to be careful here because sometimes we push just because it is our idea and not of God, and then we are just obnoxious. But when there is an idea, and it feels like it is of God we need to keep at it, until we are at least listened to. We may not have the complete reward of a Bartimaeus, who met Jesus and received his sight, but when we persistently strive to be faithful, sometimes really good things happen.

I think of a church where one of the members decided that the church should adopt a section of the highway to keep it free from litter. His idea was met with less than great enthusiasm. Yet, he submitted the paperwork, got it approved. When the first time came to pick up trash he had put notices in the bulletin but only two others came. After an hour they left and he spent an entire weekend picking up trash on both sides of the road. He was disappointed but not deterred. He had two signs made up saying the

name of the church with trash pick-up going on today. He let everyone know that he was going to put them up on the highway the next time they collected trash! Now everyone was upset. If he put up the signs and no one came how would that look to the community? They grumbled but soon they were planning a breakfast beforehand and snacks later. By the time I came as pastor most of the church turned out twice a year for trash day. It was a great social time and something people put on their calendars so they would be in town. Persistence with faith makes a difference.

Do you have good ideas that you have not shared because you were not sure anyone would listen to you? Have you been easily deterred because you didn't want to appear to be pushy? Is God challenging you to lift up your voice and say, "Listen to me?" Bartimaeus reminds us that persistence is often the way God moves people and the church to new visions and plans.

Bartimaeus' prayer, "Jesus, have mercy." has been repeated by the faithful to this day. We say a form of it during joys and concerns when after a request we say, "Lord have mercy." It is a reminder to us that God's mercy is always present. When we are feeling lost, alone, filled with fear or needing direction we can always pray, "Lord have mercy!" We can pray it in confidence for we know God is a God of mercy and if we open ourselves to it, in whatever form it takes, we will find mercy.

I think of the woman who told me about coming to church really angry about how a close friend had disappointed her. She almost didn't come to church because she was so angry. She came praying for mercy. That day after church a person whom she barely knew came up to her and thanked her for a prayer she had given some weeks before. She was told, "Your words were just what I needed that day." She remembered the prayer. It was about forgiveness. In that moment the anger began to dissipate and her wounded spirit began to find healing. She had received mercy.

Easter, for Mark, ends in silence with the women running away in fear. Holy Week begins with one shouting his faith and belief in Jesus as Messiah. Most of us live between the two extremes. How do we learn to have a persistent faith like Bartimaeus? It comes in believing that Jesus will have mercy on us and that nothing can keep us from the love and grace of God.