

Attention Please

Mark 10:46-52

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They came to Jericho.

As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho,
Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar,
was sitting by the roadside.

When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth,
he began to shout out and say,
“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Many sternly ordered him to be quiet,
but Bartimaeus cried out even more loudly,
“Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Jesus stood still and said, “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, he sprang up and came to Jesus.
Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?”
The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.”

Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.”
Immediately he regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way.

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Mark 10:46-52

October 24, 2021

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I.

Whew! It has been a *very* interesting week and we have much to discuss. This morning I would like to take a slightly different approach to the sermon. Typically, the homiletical effort is directed toward some particular scriptural verse or story. Today, however, I'd like to encourage us to direct our attention to the story *within* the story. Of course, we must first understand the larger story and then we'll get the shovels out and dig down to the story *within* the story. To do so we will avail ourselves of one particular shovel: the first-ever meeting of the Village of Canton's newly formed Community Engagement Committee. If you haven't already done so, I suggest you buckle up.

II.

We begin with the story alliteratively named the Blind Beggar Bartimaeus, found in Mark 10:46-52. Owing to both physical limitations and (we can imagine) cultural limitations, it would seem Bartimaeus really doesn't have an awful lot to do except sit at one particular spot by the side of the road, and rely on the good will of others in order to exist from day to day; with each day being pretty much like every other day. However, on one *particular* day Jesus the miracle-worker is passing by. We, of course, recognize that this story appears at the *end* of Mark's gospel. In fact, Jesus is passing by on his way to Jerusalem, and this interaction with Bartimaeus is the very last thing he will do before the cascade of events which, as we understand it, begins with Palm Sunday and ends on Easter Sunday morning.

III.

Given this, it is something of a day of days for Bartimaeus. In fact, it is nothing short of an opportunity of a lifetime when Jesus walks by. So, what should Bartimaeus do? Remember, he can't see. He can only listen to the voices of this very large crowd as they pass by above him while sitting there on the ground. All the while he is trying to guess that *one* moment when Jesus is in *earshot* in order that he might have *his* shot at a better life. Now, understand, the stakes are pretty high. Bartimaeus is only ever going to get this one chance. He has to cut through the din of the crowd, quickly get

Jesus' attention, and do so in such a way that Jesus will respond to *his* voice, rather than the chorus of Jesus' followers, or any number of *other* beggars with whom he quite probably shared the road.

IV.

So, cleverly, here is what Bartimaeus does: He shouts, **JESUS**,,, (acknowledging it is Jesus alone who can help him)...**Son of David**... (signifying he knows & believes who Jesus is) ...**Have mercy on me!** (meaning, help me somehow, and in anyway you want; beggars can't be choosers).

However, this does not sit well at all with Jesus' disciples. They, apparently, become outraged that Bartimaeus would have the audacity to ask for mercy; and, in a sign that they are missing the whole point here, would ask Jesus for it. *Sternly* they ordered Bartimaeus to BE QUIET! But, Bartimaeus cried out even more loudly, "HAVE MERCY ON ME!" Well, all we can say, is *good* for Bartimaeus. It was only through his *insistence* that his voice was finally heard by Jesus.

V.

When Bartimaeus was finally heard, Jesus stood still and came to a stop. Grinding to a halt all the motion of life passing by on the road that day (including his own journey to Calvary) Jesus called Bartimaeus over to him. Seizing the long hoped-for opportunity he rarely dared to imagine, Bartimaeus *sprang* to his feet and came to Jesus. Jesus asks him, "*What do you want me to do for you?*" Bartimaeus replies, "*My teacher, let me see again.*" Then Jesus simply says to him (no fan fare, no fancy words or ritual) "*Go; your faith has made you well.*" And (SNAP), just like *that* Bartimaeus regained his sight, and chose to follow Jesus on the way.

VI.

Certainly, this is a very instructive story with much to say to us about the importance of mercy (which is both hard to find and rarely sought in this world) and, also, the power that abides in one's own faith. We are not going to talk about any of that today, however. Instead, let me tell you about a Zoom meeting I attended Thursday evening of the Community Engagement Committee.

A result of the former Governor's NYS Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative Executive Order No. 203, which arose out of the Black Lives Matter movement and the issues surrounding policing and law enforcement, every municipality in our state was charged with doing a review of their police department. To their great credit, Village of Canton officials took the mandate quite seriously, gathered a committee of about 15 people, and undertook a multi-month study which, in March of last year, produced a [30 page report](#) (click on link to view) detailing a plan to *“improve the relationship between the Canton community and the Canton Police Department, to improve policing policies and procedures, and to support the mental health and wellbeing of our officers.”*

VII.

This plan details 18 Recommendations, of which number 13 states the following:

The Canton Police Department will continue to engage with the wider community in intentional ways. The department will collaborate with interested community members to form a Community Engagement Committee that will meet quarterly to discuss current challenges and opportunities with respect to public safety. The committee will identify and promote community engagement events such as open forums, BBQs, and picnics.

I happen to possess a great desire to support the Canton Police Department, primarily out of a sense of gratitude for how they have consistently, and without exception, acted with professionalism and kindness each and every time I've had to call on them over the past 23 years; which, given our church's ownership of the Park and the nature of my profession, has been quite often.

VIII.

Recognizing the general climate in our nation, and within certain segments of our community, which tend to view law enforcement in a more generalized way, I felt it important to offer my first-hand experience of this *particular* department in an effort to bring some balance to the conversation, and to support the specific officers who have been so supportive of me and our church over the years. Hence, I volunteered to serve on the Community Engagement Committee. However, I did so with the clear caveat that although I felt this committee will be increasingly crucial to our community, I would be very pleased to step aside if others wished to serve instead.

When I joined the Zoom call Thursday evening and saw on my computer screen just four other community members, along with two village Trustees and Police Chief Jim Santimaw, I realized the my main qualification for being chosen for the committee was that of “warm body.” Which is fine and, frankly, not at all surprising and much as I feared.

XI.

As the meeting began, I quickly realized I’d made an egregious and regrettable error; and my worst nightmare quickly unfolded. *Holeey smokes!* The initial part of the meeting was wholly given over to how to recruit more members for the committee and, more particularly, what segments of the community they should represent. Recognizing this was clearly a case of letting the perfect stand in the way of the good, I suggested that, perhaps, we should just start doing some activities (you know, to get some momentum going) and, hopefully, this would also generate interest in others joining the committee.

Oh no, one person said, BBQs and picnics aren’t going to do anything until we start addressing the root causes of the issue. Then the conversation moved to a lesson about how policing isn’t just about being safe from crime, it is also about the crime of feeling unsafe in one’s own community for a variety reasons. Apparently there are some for whom this is news and, apparently, there are others who have not yet heard the news that this really isn’t news to some. Nonetheless, I quietly repeated the course.

XII.

However, once the conversation turned to forming ground rules and agreements for how the committee would operate as a committee, I will freely admit that my blood pressure started to tick up. Not so much because of what was being said, but because I’m all kinds of done with talking things to death in a committee rather than actually DOING something or accomplishing ANYthing.

Though I’m not necessary *proud* of it, neither am I embarrassed to say that it was at this point I started formulating an exit plan. My finger hovered over my track pad at the “Raise Hand” button as I pondered politely informing the others that this really wasn’t what I imagined and, as quickly as possible, to take my leave.

XIII.

However, just before I “clicked” I looked over to the right-hand corner of my screen and saw Chief Santimaw sitting there, alone in an empty Police Station, on a Thursday night, watching all of this unfold. I said to myself, “Mike, if you are as grateful to the Canton Police Department as you say, and if you really want to support them, *here* is where it begins. So, I shifted my attention from *what* was being said to *who* was saying it and to *why* it might be being said.

Though I do tend to oversimplify things, and others there that night may understand it differently, it seems that what this all boiled down to is that some of us, like me, are on the committee to plan BBQs and events. Others, though, joined the committee to help enable every segment of the community to have their voices heard; beginning with their *own* voice right here in this committee.

XIV.

Then it hit me, the story *within* the story. People just want to be heard. Some people feel they’ve waited a lifetime for the opportunity. All the while, the world keeps turning and passing by with the din of commotion from all those with whom we share the road drowning out their voice; sometimes, even the voice they hear in their own head. So, they shout out, “attention *please*.” Or, as it is phrased in today scripture reading, “Have mercy on me!” Moreover, just like Bartimaeus’ experience with the disciples, many have been told to BE QUIET and are chided for having the audacity to ask for mercy.

At the start of Thursday’s meeting, I admit I was much like the disciples. I missed the whole point of what this committee could be doing, and most certainly should be doing: allowing folks in the community to speak; and, then, actually listening to their voices. Almost always, the first thing being said, is “attention, *please*.”

XV.

No matter the story you read, listen to, or exist within, there is always a story within that larger story. Returning to the Blind Beggar Bartimaeus, the everyday miracle we possess is the power to muster the awareness to hear the voice of others (which is sometimes all we *can* do) and, then, to have a heart

full enough of mercy to actually *listen* to those voices; recognizing that we all rely on the good will of others in order to exist from day to day.

A careful reading of today's scripture reveals that it was not Jesus who healed Bartimaeus but, rather, the faith and courage Bartimaeus mustered in making his voice heard. I think sometimes we forget just how close at hand is the means to our own healing; as individuals and, even, as a community. It is our *faith* which makes us well. Faith in each other, faith in ourselves and faith in the world God intends us to inhabit, care for and, especially, enjoy. Amen.