

October 24th, 2021

Year B; 22nd Pentecost

Jeremiah 31: 7-9

Psalm 126

Mark 10: 46-52

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Mark 10:46-52

Jesus and his disciples 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 he 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 him on the way.

Our gospel this morning from Mark, finds Jesus in Jericho, just 15 miles from Jerusalem. As I have mentioned before, Mark is the shortest of the gospels and the first to be written. The writer of Mark moves the action along at a fast pace and thus, quite quickly, we find ourselves this morning almost to the Jerusalem city limits.

Though the leaves are changing in our world and the crisp air of autumn is near, our lesson transports us to the verge of Holy Week; right after this story today of Bartimaeus, Jesus will enter Jerusalem, riding the donkey, with the tensions rising and the palms waving.

So close to Jerusalem, a very large crowd is traveling with Jesus, eager to be close to this man now well-known and seemingly powerful, but the path he is

on is the path of compassion, of self-sacrifice, of the cross.

But for now, the crowds see only a celebrity and gather close to Jesus. As they are leaving the city of Jericho, a blind man shouts out.

Bartimaeus can hear the crowd and has asked others what is happening, and they have told him that Jesus of Nazareth is coming by.

Bartimaeus shouts out to Jesus, but he does not call out: “Jesus of Nazareth, have mercy on me!” Nazareth simply places Jesus on the map.

No, Bartimaeus shouts loudly: “Jesus Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Bartimaeus knows and sees what the eager crowd cannot, that Jesus is not just a celebrity or even a healer, He is the Messiah.

Now we have to note that Bartimaeus is WAY out of line to be shouting at all. The blind were allowed to beg, but only to beg quietly. Their begging allowed the seemingly faithful to feel good about dropping coins in their cups, but the blind, like all the disabled, were among the outcast, those not allowed full rights in the community. So they could beg, but they could not draw attention to themselves, and they certainly could not shout, or be so bold.

So some in the crowd speak strongly to Bartimaeus, harshly calling him down, calling him back into his usual role. But Bartimaeus sees something no one else does.

And so he shouts out, even more loudly: “Jesus Son of David, have mercy on me!”

And Jesus stops on his way to Jerusalem, so close now to his own call,

Jesus still stops, and the text tells us he “stood still”.

Oh, if we could learn only that from this passage, the example of Jesus, could we learn to stop in the midst of crowding days, and stand still when an unexpected shout comes into our day, not rushing on, but really hearing, really seeing?

By standing still, Jesus notices and knows, and he asks for Bartimaeus to come to him.

And Bartimaeus leaps up and flings off his cloak, likely a much-needed possession, warmth, coverage, protection, even a tent to cover him; but he tosses it aside and moves towards Jesus.

If he was going to have to continue living as a blind man, he could not afford to lose that cloak, possibly stolen when tossed aside. But Bartimaeus expects change, he is hopeful, and leaves the shroud of his former life in the dust.

Even before he is healed, Bartimaeus believes that he will be changed by Jesus.

I love how, when Bartimaeus stands before Jesus, and he is obviously blind, Jesus does not say: “I will heal your blindness.”

Jesus , unlike all of us, does not assume.

Instead, Jesus asks Bartimaeus:

“What do you want me to do for you?”

He respects Bartimaeus, despite the crowd seeing him as just a blind beggar, less than fully human, and not welcome in regular society. Jesus sees Bartimaeus, and you and me, completely, and Jesus treasures Bartimaeus even when the world does not, and another outcast is invited to the table.

Bartimaeus replies to Jesus' question:

“My teacher, let me see again.”

First, Bartimaeus says ‘again’, let me see again. He has had sight and an illness, an accident has taken his sight, a year ago, 20 years ago, we do not know, but Bartimaeus knows what he yearns for and asks for it to be restored in him.

Second, he calls Jesus, though he has never met him, first Son of David, the Messiah, and now MY teacher.

Bartimaeus perceives in the healing not just receiving his sight again, but also a new vision, a new sight for his life. And that Jesus is at the center of it, not just a Teacher, but MY teacher.

And again, Jesus does not assume.

He tells Bartimaeus, “GO; your faith has made you well.”

Jesus does not assume that he will follow him, and instead releases Bartimaeus to go, to go back to his life, perhaps to go and see all that he has missed.

But Bartimaeus, before he was healed, expected, and wanted more.

He flung off his cloak, his identity as an outcast, a cripple, and he was not

going back.

His sight was a gift, but his new life, as a follower of Jesus, as Jesus enters Jerusalem, Bartimaeus knows where he wants to go, and he follows the one he calls MY teacher.

Those outcasts that Jesus invites to his table, we often think of the tax collectors and the prostitutes, but this story reminds us that the outcasts then included the disabled, the crippled, the blind, the deaf.

And disabled folks until so recently, were not afforded full membership in our society either. Assumptions were made about their abilities, their intelligence, and so often they were sidelined or even separated from regular, full society. Their lives mattered less than 'regular' people.

This story of Bartimaeus made me think of someone I knew many years ago, when I was in high school. This was the 1970s and there were no blind students or deaf students or disabled students in my school. There were no ramps to allow wheelchairs into school, there were no alternative learning methods for those who could not see or hear.

But there was one exception to the rule at my school, one exception to the accepted way of 1970s America, one Bartimaeus who shouted, and his name was Franz.

Franz was two years older than me, and in a wheelchair. I never knew what Franz's disability was—he was very small and his body contorted and he could not walk and was in a motorized wheelchair—but everyone knew Franz's abilities, because he was brilliant, an incredible intellectual mind.

Franz graduated from our school in 1978 and went on to college at the University of Virginia. He went on to be one of the organizers of the Independence Resource Center in Charlottesville, offering resources and guidance to people with disabilities.

Franz is included in a book called Charlottesville Bridge Builders, and his entry concludes with this:

“Franz was a dogged advocate who pushed UVA toward providing more accessibility on (the university’s) grounds. Tragically, on a day Franz was going to a meeting with UVA officials, the absence of a curb cut led him to follow a path without a sidewalk. Wet grass caused his wheelchair to tumble down an embankment, killing him instantly. His shocking death spurred a flurry of belated improvements at the University, but the community lost an amazingly creative citizen far too soon.”

Franz died in 1988, at the age of 28.

Two years later in July 1990 President George H. W. Bush signed The Americans with Disabilities Act, now known as the ADA, into law. And those occasional curb cuts became mandatory. Along with myriad other changes to buildings, streets, and our world to make regular society and opportunities accessible for differently-abled folks.

Sadly, I heard and still hear people grumble about the ADA 31 years later, yes even and often church folk: “Why do we need to renovate our bathrooms to allow wheelchairs access; we don’t even have people in wheelchairs here!” Hmmm.....

The term dis-abled is not used as much today because all it focuses on is what folks cannot do. If Franz and I had been in an intellectual contest, I would have been the dis-abled one.

Bartimaeus may have been blind, but he saw far more keenly than any in the crowd drawn to Jesus' popularity. Bartimaeus saw what we only seem today to glimpse dimly.

He saw Jesus not just as teacher, but as my teacher, my savior, my brother.

And what about us? Are we ready to fling off our cloak of all that holds us back, and actually expect change in our days, are we ready to expect change in our church?

Would we notice, if, like Bartimaeus, we received new sight, a new vision?

Amen.