
“An Upside-Down Kingdom: Where the Blind Can See”

A SERMON on Mark 10:46-52 for the 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Preached 24 October 2021 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister¹

Cloverdale United Church, Surrey, British Columbia, Canada

Bartimaeus was a blind man.

I’m not sure that we always appreciate what that means in today’s society, where people who are blind have the ability to participate meaningfully in the world, to support and care for themselves and their families. That was not the case for Bartimaeus: he lived in a time and culture where the blind could not participate fully in society. He could not support and care for himself or family, and there were no social institutions to help him. Bartimaeus begged *not* because he was down on his luck; he begged because he was blind and entirely dependent on the occasional mercy of a passer-by.

How are we blind? How might we relate with Bartimaeus?

Undoubtedly, there are at least some of us here today who have had an experience in our lives that makes it pretty easy to identify with Bartimaeus, at least to some extent. Loss of eyesight, hearing, some other physical obstacle. Poverty, homelessness. Depression, anxiety, some other type of mental illness. Whatever it is, where in our lives can we connect with Bartimaeus? When we have felt unable to participate in what’s going on around us? How have we found ourselves feeling unsupported and at the mercy of strangers? Where are you unseen and unheard in the world? How do you identify with Bartimaeus’ experience, whether due to your age, your gender, your sexual orientation, your race, your social class, your economic status, your physical abilities, your immigration status? How have you known what it is like to be ignored and derided by others, to be unseen or unheard because of who you are?

After all, Bartimaeus wasn’t the only one blind in today’s story.

Bartimaeus was unseen and unheard *by others*. Countless others all around him persistently failed to see him, hear him, know him. Sure, he was occasionally the object of their pity or their derision. But for the most part, he was simply ignored. Bartimaeus would stand up, and people would look the other way. He would cry out, and people would pretend that they couldn’t hear him. Or they’d tell him to be quiet—I’m not sure which is worse. Bartimaeus is the one described as blind, but the world was both blind and deaf to him.

If we’re being honest with ourselves, many of us have probably spent more time on *this* side of Bartimaeus’ experience. We have been the one telling others to quiet down; we have been the ones who pretend not to see the suffering and needs of others; we have been the one who has derided and heaped insult upon those who are marginalized; we have been the ones blind and deaf to those in our midst.

All of this comes together, the inability to see and the failure to see, when the cry rings out: “have mercy on me!” Bartimaeus cries out, and Jesus stops, and stands still.

¹ This sermon includes material adapted from a sermon on this text preached by the Rev. Adam Yates on 28 October 2012 at St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, East Haddam, Connecticut; used and adapted by permission.

Jesus stopped and stood still. The one who moved over the formless void as the earth was created stopped and stood still. The God who animates all of creation stopped and stood still. And in the stillness, God saw Bartimaeus. In the stillness, God heard. In the stillness, God *called* Bartimaeus.

Though we can identify with so much of suffering and pain in this story, it is bursting with Good News. It is the Good News that God cares for each and every one of us. It is the Good News that God sees and hears us even when no one else does. It is the Good News that God, the Great Mover, loves us so completely that God would stop and stand still when we cry out and, in the stillness, call to us.

When Christ's voice called out in the stillness, everything changed. Bartimaeus the unseen and unheard was suddenly seen and heard by everyone in the gathered crowd. The crowd that had been blind and deaf to the other in their midst suddenly had their eyes opened and their ears unstopped. And Bartimaeus the blind beggar was blind no more. In that moment, everything and everyone was transformed.

How do we respond to such transformations in our lives when we experience them? Bartimaeus shows us the way in today's story. It is possible that Bartimaeus had been blind his whole life (we don't know for sure), and then one day he encounters Jesus and he is blind no more. Now, you might think that his first response would be to go out and "see all the great sights", if you will, that had been beyond his grasp for so long. But that is not what he does.

When Jesus heals Bartimaeus, it is not just his sight that is transformed. Bartimaeus who sits by the roadside is re-oriented in his encounter with Jesus; no longer is the road in front him hidden, the direction he must go unknown, the way before him unclear. Bartimaeus does not run off to make up for lost time, but immediately begins following Jesus on the way. And just to be clear, in Mark's Gospel, "the way" does not mean "down the road," it means, "on the way to the cross." Jesus tells Bartimaeus to "go," and the place Bartimaeus chooses to go is to follow Jesus to where Jesus is going. In his encounter with Jesus, Bartimaeus is not simply healed, not simply transformed, but is oriented in the way of Christ. Bartimaeus is oriented in the way of the cross.

And so it is with us, my friends. When we at last cry out to Jesus, when we truly encounter Christ, we are not simply healed of whatever ails us, we are transformed and oriented in a new way. Like Bartimaeus, we become oriented in the way of Christ, the way of discipleship, the way that leads us to the cross, the way that leads to death and resurrection, the way that leads to hope and new life—the way, my friends, that lets us truly see the great mystery of God's love.

BLESSING AND HONOUR, GLORY AND POWER BE UNTO GOD, NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.