

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost, October 24, 2021  
“Lord, Have Mercy” (Mark 10:46-52)

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. In a few short days he would enter the holy city to shouts of *Hosanna*, and march out under the burden of his own cross to shouts of *Crucify him!* The road to Jerusalem led though the town of Jericho – the same Jericho Joshua and the people of Israel had captured when initially entering the promised land after their rescue from Egypt.

With only a few days before the beginning of the Passover celebration, the road through Jericho was a busy one, filled with priests and pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem, as well as local residents who would not make the trip. But the locals anticipated what the Passover would bring to Jericho. They filled the streets, awaiting the rabbis who would pass through. Because the rabbis would teach as they walked along, the people would be able to join in for a short time. Of particular interest was Jesus. The citizens of Jericho were well aware of all Jesus had done in so many other places and for so many other people. When the news came that Jesus was about to pass through, the crowds began to grow in size. Somewhere in the midst of all these people, Mark tells us there was a blind man named Bartimaeus.

Now, blindness is a horrible affliction in any age, but it was especially so in Jesus’ day. Not only did the blind live under the social stigma that their blindness was God’s punishment for sin, but there were no specialized services for the blind. Because they couldn’t work, the blind had no choice except to beg for their daily bread. This was the reality Bartimaeus faced every day. Living in complete and utter darkness, he was totally dependent on the mercy of others for his very existence.

But as blind as Bartimaeus was, his ears worked just fine. While sitting at the side of the road, he heard a big commotion. A great crowd was coming down the road. The name, Jesus, reached his ears. He had heard about this teacher from Nazareth who had traveled throughout Israel preaching a message of God’s grace, mercy, and forgiveness. He had heard about the healing miracles he performed, miracles that had never been seen before. He had also heard about Jesus’ compassion, his love for the lost, and his call to discipleship. Blind as he was, Bartimaeus saw Jesus for who he was. Without having been able to see the things Jesus had done, he believed Jesus to be the promised Messiah; the One in King David’s line promised by God a thousand years earlier; the One who would establish God’s kingdom on earth.

Now I want to interrupt the story for just a moment and look at how Mark uses the structure of his gospel and this particular story to make a point. Back in chapter 8, Jesus opens the eyes of another blind man. He then works hard to open the eyes of the disciples.

In Caesarea Philippi, Jesus tells them that *the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the religious authorities, and be killed, and after three days rise again*. But Peter rebukes him. Peter cannot see.

Passing on through Galilee, Jesus tells the disciples again: *The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise again*. Mark tells us: *But they did not understand and were afraid to ask him*. They could not see.

Then, as they were going up to Jerusalem, where he would be betrayed and killed, Jesus tries one last time to show the disciples what is about to transpire: *The Son of Man will be handed over. He will be killed. He will rise from the dead.* In response to Jesus' words, the brothers, James and John, ask him for places of honor when he comes into his glory. James and John still don't see.

The disciples see Jesus, without really seeing him. Their eyes are open, but they are blind to who Jesus really is and the true nature of his mission. Then Mark gives us this second story of a blind man. Bartimaeus can't physically see Jesus, but can see who Jesus is. And he believes in Jesus. With childlike faith, he trusts that this Jesus of Nazareth is the one man who can help him.

Using this contrast between Bartimaeus and the disciples, Mark shows us that believing is about more than what can be seen. Think about baptism. What we see is water being poured over an infant's head. Yet we believe that in those waters, the child is being claimed and adopted by God and joined to the death and resurrection of Christ. The same is true with holy communion. We see only bread and wine, but we believe that Christ is present in those elements to offer us the gifts of life, salvation, and the forgiveness of our sins. Therefore, seeing is not always believing; but believing is seeing. Because Bartimaeus believes Jesus to be the promised One, he sees what the disciples cannot.

Immediately, he began to shout, *Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!* The people around Bartimaeus tried to keep him quiet, but he was persistent, undeterred. *Son of David, have mercy on me!* This blind beggar trusted that Jesus had the power to do what no one else could do, so he begged Jesus to stop and take notice of his great need.

Whether we care to admit it or not, we are all like Bartimaeus in that we are all beggars before God. We are all conceived and born without fear or faith in God. We are born dead in sin, blind to the gospel, and enemies of God. We are completely helpless to save ourselves. Therefore, we are miserable beggars before God who can do nothing but cry out for mercy.

Our liturgy reminds us of this. One of the first things we do each Sunday is sing the words of the Kyrie: *Lord, have mercy.* And when we celebrate the sacrament, we sing: *O Christ, the Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us.* These words remind us that we are sinful beggars, calling out – like Bartimaeus – to the only One who can help and save us.

Hearing the blind man's shouts, Jesus stopped and said, *Call him.* So the people did: *Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you.* It seems that, based on Jesus' reputation, the people guessed what Jesus might do for him. (Being given sight would certainly have been a reason to cheer up!) It's kind of amazing that Jesus even stopped. As he walked the lonely road to the cross, facing horrible suffering and death, you'd think he would not want to be bothered. But compassion was his nature. Time and again in the gospels, we find Jesus stopping whatever he was doing or altering his plans, making himself available to the needs of hurting people who were like sheep without a shepherd.

During our times of suffering, trouble, or weakness, we might think Jesus has better things to do than concern himself with us and our problems. But we would be wrong. There is no problem too big and no believer too small for Jesus. He proclaimed to Zacchaeus – another citizen of Jericho – that he *came to seek and to save what was lost*. Jesus came to hear and help beggars; beggars like Bartimaeus, and beggars like you and me.

Bartimaeus didn't waste any time. He threw his cloak aside, jumped to his feet, and came to Jesus. That cloak was quite possibly the blind man's only earthly possession. Yet, at Jesus' invitation, he threw it aside to run to Jesus whom he believed could give him everything he needed and more. Think of how this man stands in contrast to the rich, young ruler from the gospel a few weeks back. The wealthy man could not part with his possessions to follow Jesus, but Bartimaeus gives up the one thing that could have been his roof, his mattress and his pantry. I don't think he would have done this if he didn't believe that Jesus held the power of God to deliver him.

Jesus asked the blind man, *What do you want me to do for you?* Bartimaeus replied, *Rabbi, I want to see*. He wasn't just asking for some money in his cup or a place to spend the night. He was asking for an impossible miracle. And he asked for that miracle because he was convinced that the One standing before him was the Son of David God had promised through the prophets – the One who had come to open the eyes of the blind, free the captive, and bring release to those who sit in darkness.

Jesus' response to Bartimaeus' request was *Go, your faith has healed you*. And immediately he received his sight. Now we need to understand that Jesus was not saying it was Bartimaeus' great faith that caused his healing. If that were true, Bartimaeus could have "believed" himself healed sooner, rather than waiting for Jesus to walk by. Bartimaeus' faith healed (or saved) him because it led him to the only one who could heal him. His faith was nothing more and nothing less than a beggar's open hand that would receive the gift Jesus would graciously give. Faith simply receives what Jesus freely gives.

And Bartimaeus' faith didn't stop there. Mark tells us that he followed Jesus along the road. This tells me that he became a disciple. Furthermore, it tells all of us that every beggar by the roadside is a potential disciple. So the next time we see a homeless person or someone standing at an intersection holding a sign, may we think of Bartimaeus. That beggar at the side of the road may be looking for a relationship with Jesus, and we know how to direct him.

So Bartimaeus followed Jesus. Of course, the road Jesus traveled led directly to the cross. It led to suffering and pain and persecution – not only for Jesus, but for all who were bold enough to follow him. And that's what Bartimaeus did. Even though he no longer needed to beg for daily bread, he was still a spiritual beggar. Like us, he needed Jesus to die for him. He still needed what only Jesus could give.

Unfortunately, that's a lesson so many of us forget. We're so much like the nine lepers who walked away after receiving from Jesus what they wanted. But let us never forget that after we have come to Jesus in our time of distress, that after he has answered our cry for mercy, we are still – and always will be – beggars. From the day we were brought to the font as helpless infants

until the day we take our final breath, we will remain beggars who must rely fully on Jesus' mercy.

The healing miracles Jesus performed were evidence of this mercy. But Jesus, the very Son of God, was traveling to Jerusalem to perform the greatest act of mercy. He was traveling to Jerusalem for the eternal benefit of all people. Jesus came into our world on a mission of mercy – a mercy that strengthens us to endure our troubles, a mercy that helps us to trust in the midst of life's challenges, a mercy that will one day rescue us forever. This is the mercy Jesus came to show you and me. Lord, have mercy. And all God's people say Amen!