



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REVEREND EARL GROUT, DEACON
THE TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 25, OCTOBER 24, 2021
JOB 42:1-6, 10-17; PSALM 34:1-8; HEBREWS 7:23-28; MARK 10:46-52

"A JOURNEY WITHOUT MAPS"

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.]*

A few years ago, I was listening to a Mariners game, when this guy with a foghorn voice sitting below the press box started up with a running commentary on the game. He kept it up, talking over the announcers. Finally, the announcers quit talking and started laughing. Bartimaeus at the ballpark! As a Mariners fan, he may well have been asking for mercy. Give him a hot dog and beer and shut him up. Didn't work at the ballpark and didn't work at Jericho. But let's put Bart on hold for a bit and look at what else is going on.

Where is this large crowd going? And what is it with Jericho? Just 15 miles from Jerusalem, Jericho is the last stage of the pilgrimage to the Temple for Passover. So many of those with Jesus were fellow pilgrims, and some had come out to wish the pilgrims well on their journey.

Some were there to listen to Jesus. Distinguished rabbis and teachers often lectured as they walked. Famous for this was the Greek philosopher Aristotle. In fact, a school of philosophy was named after him and other walking teachers. So,

pilgrims, well-wishers, disciples, students and the curious were all ambling along listening to the master, when they hear, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

“Son of David” means Messiah. So, in the crowd were those expecting Jesus to be the savior, who will kick out the Romans and free Israel. Some of them were probably Jesus’s disciples, in particular, James and John, and probably Peter and Judas, too.

And there were some in the crowd who did not wish Jesus well. Thousands of priests served the huge Temple in sections throughout the year. At Passover, they all headed to Jerusalem, and no doubt a number of them were there in Jericho. Jesus’s growing renewal movement opposed the Temple orthodoxy, so the priests were always looking for ways to do away with him.

The disciples were with Jesus as he walked and taught. The preceding chapters in Mark give us an idea of what he taught about the kingdom of God. What they heard in Jericho they probably did not understand any better than they did throughout Mark’s account.

A major theme in Mark is the obtuseness of the disciples. To Mark, I suspect, all disciples are dense. Us, too. In the chapters leading up to Bartimaeus, the disciples witness 11 healings, 4 miracles, 3 predictions of the Passion and numerous parables and teachings. They witness two mass feedings and Jesus twice calming the sea, sure indications of his divinity in their day. If this isn’t enough, they are also present at the Transfiguration. And we, with a lifetime of readings piled on top of two millennia of interpretation are witnesses in our own right.

So, what’s with these guys, and us? I think the disciples were overwhelmed by the intensity of divinity in their midst and the upending of their way of life. It’s no wonder they interpreted what they experienced in terms they knew. A new kingdom? Get us in on the ground floor, Jesus. No, you can’t just go off and get killed. No wonder Jesus keeps asking throughout Mark, “Do you not understand?”

And we are so used to reading these stories that they slide right by us. OK, Jesus walked on water, fed thousands with a couple of grocery bags of food, and his

clothes became “dazzling white,” better than a detergent commercial. “Walking on water,” in fact, has become part of our daily speech. Do we not understand?

Seeing—the opposite of obtuseness—is also a major theme in Mark. In chapters 8—10, the healing of two blind men — the last being Bartimaeus — bookend or bracket stories that reveal Jesus’s identity and the nature of the Way he is teaching. Mark wants us to see what the disciples were blind to while Jesus was with them. He wants us to see Jesus’s divinity and that his Way is rooted in love, compassion offered as self-giving service, even self-sacrifice. “For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10.45). Jesus speaks openly.

Then in Jericho, he shows us by calling Bartimaeus over. The way of the world is to leave Bartimaeus and those like him by the side of the road as “collateral damage” or “acceptable losses.” But in the Way of Jesus, even a blind beggar has infinite worth. He not only restores sight to Bartimaeus but calls him over to join the others traveling with him. Part of his healing is being included.

“Go; your faith has made you well” (Mark 10.52). Bartimaeus embodies faith. He perseveres in calling Jesus. He knows exactly what he wants — “My teacher, let me see again” (Mark 10.51). “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” as it is written in Hebrews (11.1). Bartimaeus is sure he will see again and is convinced Jesus will make it happen.

Faith is another major theme in Mark. In earlier stories, some struggle. Jairus despairs for his daughter’s healing. “Do not fear, only believe” (Mark 5.36), Jesus urges. The father who fears for his epileptic son asks Jesus to heal him if “you are able” (Mark 9.22). Jesus replies, “If you are able! — all things can be done for the one who believes” (Mark 9.23). The father cries out, “I believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9.24).

I see faith as a grace — a gift. Like all the gifts of the Spirit, we need only open our hearts to receive it. Opening the heart is the work of prayer. Paul urges us to pray without ceasing (1 Thes. 5.17). So let us pray for faith.

The opposite of faith is not doubt, but control. As Jairus and the other father worry about their children, they are trying to control the situation. In their fear, they grasp for assurance. Remember the camel and the eye of the needle? That's not about money — it's about control. When we have resources, we suffer the illusion that we have control in our lives. We don't. The work of the spiritual life is learning that, without needing a bad diagnosis to teach us.

Faith, as author Frederick Buechner said, is “a journey without maps.” We don't know where we are going really — our lives are very fragile. But we go anyway, knowing that we are loved. When Jesus came by, this infinite love achieved crystal clarity for Bartimaeus, and he knew salvation was at hand. And he followed Jesus on the Way, a journey without maps. And we go, too. May the Holy Spirit guide us on the Way.



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