

## A New Start for Blind Bart

Read Mark 10:46-52

My dad's first name was Wilbur which made me thankful to be named William. He didn't like the name much and neither did I. His father was named William, his brother-in-law was William whose nickname was Uncle Bud. As an infant I was swimming at the right end of the naming pool, narrowly escaping becoming Wilbur Jr. My Aunt Mary and Uncle Bud lived with my grandmother on her farm in western Pennsylvania and when I was young, before Jean and before my driver's license, I would spend a month to six weeks during the summer on the farm.

Uncle Bud worked in a steel mill gauging pipe and worked shifts: 8-4, 4-12, and midnight-8 AM. Uncle Bud always showed me a good time. I'd wait for him to either come home or wake up in the afternoons after working midnight. He taught me to drive the tractor and how to use it on the farm. He taught me to drive his car when I was at the ripe age of 14 and not quite legal. He taught me to fish and took me hunting though I never had much success at that. Mostly though, we'd hop in the car and go visiting someone or other.

I think his motive was to escape all the honey-dos lined up by both my grandmother and my aunt. He'd have ready excuses for leaving, such as having a bushel of turnips to give away to some unsuspecting victim. We'd pull up to someone's place and exchange greetings. Some unknown adult would ask him who I was and he would say, "This is Billy. He's Wilbur's boy." "Oh, you're Wilbur's boy." We'd shake hands and the socializing would begin.

As I think about it all these years later I remember some of how I felt then. The first thing I remember was a tone I heard in their voices which let me know my dad was both known and respected, though I didn't know why or what for. The second thing I received was a sense of belonging. Though I didn't know who I was or what I'd become, I had a place in the social scheme of things. Some of my dad's glory reflected upon me through no merit of my own. I had worth and

value just by being “Wilbur’s boy.” It doesn’t seem like much now but it must have been important to me back then because I still remember the feelings I had.

Let’s look at our Mark text for today. The main character encountering Jesus is a blind beggar, Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus. In Hebrew, the prefix *bar* simply means “son of.” We are not told if he had another name to go by; he was simply “Timaeus’s boy.” And he was blind. And he was a beggar. And he lived and sat and begged by the roadside just outside of Jericho. He’d probably learned to live with the insinuating whispers that he must be some kind of miserable sinner to be so afflicted. Conventional religion often attributed suffering to the displeasure of God.

Conventional religion can easily become condemning of those less fortunate, sitting on the sidelines of the poor and passing judgment upon their poor choices in life. I recently heard Father Gregg Boyle who has a ministry to the inner city in the worst parts of LA say that rather than passing judgment upon the poor we should stand in awe of how they survive in the midst of a very harsh world and challenged life. I thought that was a great perspective.

I don’t think it’s reading too much into the story to guess that Bartimaeus’ afflictions had come to define him. “This is who I am: I’m blind and I’m a beggar. I can’t see and I can’t provide for myself. I must learn to make my living by calling on the sympathy of others. To get it, I’ll need to make myself compellingly pathetic. My purpose is simply to survive. I am judged by others and by myself as being unimportant.”

I wish it were true that such low self esteem and depression could be said to be rare, but in my experience it is not. Far too many people have come to let their hardships and their circumstances define them, marginalize them, and finally negate them.

You may recall that Jericho sat just on the west bank of the Jordan River. It was the first walled, fortress city that confronted Israel when they entered the Land of Promise. Israel had crossed on dry ground after God parted the waters of the Red Sea enabling them to escape their bondage in Egypt. They then had

passed through the river bed of Jordan on dry ground as God piled up the river waters giving them passage into the Promised Land. As the Psalmist said, so it was: “He will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.” Jericho was situated right at the gateway to the promises of God. To grow deeper in God, to leave bondage and enter promises, there are always obstacles to overcome from the beginning.

Can that ancient city, that initial obstacle to Israel, serve as a metaphor for something that is quite common in the spiritual life? I think it can. Too many people, maybe some of us, are content to take up residence just inside the promises of God. Too many like to get into the Kingdom by the skin of their teeth. Too many settle for what amounts to superficial spirituality, tantamount to blindness to the ways and works of God. Too many see their Christian life as begging from the spirituality of other disciples who pass them by on the road of spiritual growth. To grow spiritually you must walk the road. And to walk the road you need to have your own blindness healed and your spiritual capacity to see restored.

I find it remarkable that buried under all that condemnation, isolation, rejection, and affliction, there still lives the capacity for hope in the heart of Bartimaeus. And somehow just hearing about Jesus of Nazareth had rekindled the flame. But it must have been a very small flame. What was the likelihood that Jesus would ever pass his way? How slim the prospects that even if he did he would give him the time of day? But then, wonder of wonders, he heard that Jesus was walking very near to where he was sitting.

When I think about it, in this whole wide world with billions of people, what have been our own prospects of having a personal encounter with Jesus Christ? What were the odds? Yet here we are, encountered, saved, and being ministered to continually by the King of kings and Lord of lords. If that doesn't boggle your mind, check and see if you have a pulse.

Hearing that Jesus was indeed passing by, Bartimaeus' hope burst into white hot flame. He cried out, “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!”

The crowd that day made an erroneous assumption: Jesus, the man of God, would want nothing to do with such an obviously miserable sinner being punished by God for some unknown but just reason, for some sin which God needed to be judged by suffering. They all commanded such an unworthy person to simply shut up, but he’d listened to them long enough. Bartimaeus had nothing more to lose by ignoring them and crying out all the more loudly.

I recently attended a presbytery mandated, day-long seminar on boundary awareness led by Dr. Steve Treat. It was excellent and well worth my time. During the course of the day he covered a wide range of issues. At one point he spoke about the “Me too” movement and as a therapist how significant he felt it was.

As you probably know, women who have been sexually abused and so ashamed that they have suffered in silence and in the shadows, some for many years, have begun to speak up. They have begun to rise above the shame and speak out for justice and on behalf of others who have been too afraid to come forward. The movement began when just a few women mustered up the courage to come into the public light, a public too often known to blame the victims and try to silence them. Abused women, emboldened by their sisters’ bravery, are finding their voice at last.

Bartimaeus was a man who recovered his voice enough to cry out to Jesus. And Jesus heard him. He could have said, “Oh, the poor man is blind, I’ll go over to him.” The man was sitting within ear-shot so the distance would not have been too great an inconvenience. But instead Jesus said, “Call him here.” Why would he do that?

Number one, Jesus is making those who told the man to be quiet change their relationship to Bartimaeus. He moves them from saying, “Shut up,” to “Come here.” Judges become agents of mercy at Jesus’ direction. Typically, communities surrounding the suffering need to be corrected regarding their

attitudes. They need to be moved from judgment to mercy, from censoring to inviting.

Number two, Jesus knew the value of involving people in the healing process. The wounded and the disabled are invited to become involved in their own healing. Often we become passive in our own brokenness. We learn to make do and get by. We pray for awhile, and then give up. Bartimaeus broke out of his passivity, out of just making the most of a bad situation, when he dared to cry out. Now Jesus invited him to step out and come toward his healing.

In our healing ministry, I always say you don't have to come forward to be healed, but come if you will. I may have been underplaying the usefulness all these years of you walking the aisle and coming down front for prayer. I believe in the healing ministry and I've tried hard to avoid emotional manipulation where healing is concerned. But perhaps I should have been more like Jesus and said, "Come here!" I guess I've just figured if you were ready you'd come, and if you didn't want to it wouldn't do much good for me to urge you to walk the aisle. Everyone's faith is at a different place and is unique to their own soul.

At any rate, Bartimaeus was like a coiled spring. He sprang up and came to Jesus. He was no longer intimidated by the disapproving crowd. He became a blind beggar in motion. Jesus then took him a step further, asking the question, "What do you want me to do for you?" Why would Jesus ask that? Isn't it obvious? Well, no, it isn't that obvious. Bartimaeus could have said, "Tell my neighbors to treat me better," or "could you spare some money from your ministry purse?"

Jesus gave Bartimaeus an opening to state what he believed about Jesus. Bartimaeus says, "My teacher, let me see again." Evidently, he wasn't born blind. At one time in his life he could see, but now he couldn't. But he had a memory of sight and he knew what he had lost. He had a strong desire to recover and it was linked to faith that Jesus was able to grant his request. Just like about everyone you meet, this blind beggar had a lot more going on inside than his circumstances indicated.

It is possible for us to become so broken that we lose things we once had. Sight can indicate a number of things. Sight can indicate insight, wisdom, common sense, or knowledge. It can also indicate the capacity to notice other people in their pain and meet them with compassion and mercy and kindness and generosity and help. When we lose hope, we can lose all of these things. When hope is restored, we begin to reclaim many things we may have lost in life.

Without fanfare of any kind, Jesus merely said, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately, he regained his sight. Now don't miss the last part of the sentence: Bartimaeus "followed him on the way." Bartimaeus was free to go his own way, seeing the way he used to see. But he wasn't ever going back. With his sight made new, he followed Jesus on the way, on Jesus' way.

If we strip away all of our illusions, Blind Bartimaeus is us. We are the blind beggars. The crowd that surrounded Bartimaeus that day was composed of blind beggars too, clamoring at the feet of Grace. To recognize these things as our spiritual starting place is not a shame. It is the doorway to our healing and our restoration to the way of Jesus Christ. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"