

## **HEAR, LEARN, LIVE GOD'S WORD: HEALING**

**MARK 10: 46-52**

**OCTOBER 29, 2006**

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The day Jesus walked down Main St. Jericho a blind beggar by the name of Bartimaeus called out to him, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

People standing around the man instinctively moved away, stepped back, tried to silence him. That's what we often do with someone in pain. Move away, step aside, try to suppress the rawness of their humanity somehow.

The question "How are you?" is a euphemism for "Hello." We don't really want to know how someone is when we ask that question, least of all their troubles. We're just offering a pleasantry.

Imagine if in response to your innocent, "How ya doin'?" someone actually told you how they were doing. "Not too good, my kid wrecked the car, I just got laid off, and the neighbor is suing me." We couldn't ignore that. We'd have to change our plans, give some time and energy to this poor soul.

We don't usually like to get accurate assessments of how we are all doing because for one thing it reminds us of our own vulnerability and for another it could be pretty time consuming.

But Jesus upon hearing Bartimaeus cry out asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" It is a remarkably open-ended invitation. Blind people in Jesus' time had it rough. Who knows the laundry list Bartimaeus had ready and waiting for the first person who offered to help.

And without reservation Bartimaeus says to Jesus: "Let me see again." It's interesting when you're really desperate you get down to basics. Not all the things you want but the one or two things you need.

Jesus knew Bartimaeus wasn't trying to fleece him, knew Bartimaeus was speaking from his heart. So he healed Bartimaeus and said he was free to go.

But then something quite unusual happened. Bartimaeus didn't go on *his* way. Rather "he decided to follow Jesus on *the* way."

Lots of people are interested in seeing Jesus to get healed or be fixed but few, very few are willing to follow him. Which I'll bet in our heart of hearts is why most of us are here this morning.

One of the things Bartimaeus, the blind man who sees who Jesus is, teaches us today is that following Jesus is an act of the will.

Remember the "altar call?" an invitation by the pastor to go forward to the altar to commit your life to Jesus at the end of the worship service. In many churches the practice has fallen away and is quite rare today. Yet, altar calls were helpful as a way to remind the whole congregation that we come to church not just to get something from Jesus but to give ourselves to him.

That's what Bartimaeus reminds us today. Isn't it amazing that he is one of the few people Jesus heals in the New Testament record who actually then follows Jesus.

Perhaps you remember last week the disciples, when Jesus asked them what they wanted him to do for them said, "grant us to sit at your right and left." And the week before that, the rich man when Jesus invited him to "come and follow me," was unable to do so because of his many possessions.

Bartimaeus the man who embarrasses the bystanders calling out to Jesus looks pretty good compared to the disciples who have already been under Jesus' tutelage and a rich man who boasts obedience to the law.

We are talking these weeks of stewardship about hearing, learning and living God's word. The message of the Gospel today is that living God's word means redirecting your life, making changes in your life.

Maybe you remember C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*. Uncle Screwtape advises his apprentice devil nephew that the best way to keep people from the Christian faith is to prevent potential converts from doing anything.

"The great thing is to prevent his doing anything," says Screwtape. "As long as he does not convert it to action, it does not matter how much he thinks about this new repentance. Let the little brute wallow in it. Let him, if he has any bent that way, write a book about it; that is often an excellent way of sterilizing the seeds which the Enemy plants in a human soul. Let him do anything but act. No amount of piety in his imagination and affections will harm us if we can keep it out of his will."

Bartimaeus, I say, is a reminder, like the altar call, that while we say we're here to follow Jesus, following is really a category of diverse acts that share Jesus as their inspiration.

Bartimaeus casts off his coat, gets up and follows the rabbi. The fishermen leave their nets, the tax collector his business. In each case, they give up something familiar and comfortable for a mere promise—I will make you fishers of people.

We may not like where this is going. But the clear implication is that the journey with Jesus involves effort, action, sometimes a little pain, sometimes a lot of pain and always much trust.

Soren Kierkegaard said something similar. He noted in his day, so many creative people were dedicating their lives to make other people's lives easier—through the invention of labor saving devices and technology that relieved them of some of the burdens of work.

So the Danish existentialist and master of irony said he, therefore, decided he would dedicate his life to making other people's lives more difficult. Thus, he decided to become a preacher of the gospel.<sup>[i]</sup>

One thing's for sure if you hang out with Jesus you won't stay the same person. Like the church member who hadn't darkened the door in years. "Why haven't I been back to church?" he repeated to his pastor. "Every time I came to church, they're tried to get me to do something, change, vote this way or that, give up this or that. I just couldn't take it anymore. The way I saw it, I was either going to have to become a different person, or else look fairly ridiculous just sitting there. So I quit coming."<sup>[ii]</sup>

Sometimes I wonder if we just aren't desperate enough. I know from my own experience it's when I get desperate that I get real. When I need some deep healing or relief or discernment I cut out the rationalizing and negotiating with God.

I just say God help me I'm hurting right now. I can't do it alone. Please show me the way. I know you can. I've heard enough stories to fill a library. Come to my rescue please.

And having made that prayer I've never been turned away. I'm not saying I've always had every wish and desire provided, but I've found the strength and healing needed to move forward.

Maybe that's the difference most of us struggle with—here in North America where economic opportunity and freedom can disguise spiritual desperation.

You see, we can get what we want and solve so many of our problems by just writing a check or using our contacts. Why do we need Jesus?

But if we never make the walk to the altar of our hearts we will remain one of those bystanders watching Jesus from a distance or we'll be like the rich man who just walks away.

The difference between following Jesus and believing in Jesus is the difference between being a tourist or being a resident. Residents pay taxes, volunteer, vote. Tourists stay in hotels, spend a few dollars and look around.

My hunch is were we asked right here and now what we want for those precious children we baptized this morning, we'd say we want them not just to believe in Jesus but to follow him—

knowing full well that will mean facing their struggles and giving their desperation to Jesus when life stops them cold in their tracks. I'll bet that's what each of us longs for as well.

If the devil, and by that I mean the very real forces of darkness in this world, is worried about anything he's worried that you and I might decide to follow Jesus. That we might forgive someone some old transgression that has become a litany of resentment for us or that we might increase our pledge to the operating budget of this congregation or that we might go off and join the folks pounding nails with Habitat this morning.

The dark powers don't give a hoot what we *think* about Jesus. It is tangible deeds of compassion, forgiveness and trust that get the devil shaking in his blood-soaked boots.

Hear, Learn, Live God's Word—Bartimaeus says today be healed like me, give up the cloak of comfort that holds you back, follow Jesus on the way. Amen.

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<sup>[i]</sup> William Willimon, "On the Road with Jesus," *Pulpit Resource: October, November, December 2006*, 21.

<sup>[ii]</sup> Willimon, 22.