

“In With The In Crowd”

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Mark 10: 46-52

⁴⁶They 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.

⁴⁷When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

⁴⁸Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

⁴⁹Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.”

⁵⁰So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.

⁵¹Then 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.”

⁵²Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Sermon

There are certain scriptures that illustrate their point directly and others that do not mean a thing unless you feel them speaking to you personally. The people of the bible were just as human as you are. Immerse yourselves in the story; place yourselves outside the gate of Jericho. There is much to see and hear.

This crowd looks old enough to remember a group called “The Mamas and the Pappas.’ Today’s scripture reminds me of one of their songs, *The In Crowd*, written by Billy Page.

You may recall some of the lyrics;

I’m in with the in crowd

I go where the in crowd goes.

Ring a bell? In order to understand how today’s scripture resembles those lyrics, we must refer to the scripture preceding today’s lectionary reading. You heard this story from Pastor Frank about a month ago.

³⁵James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.”

³⁶And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?”

³⁷And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”

³⁸But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”

³⁹They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized;

⁴⁰but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

⁴¹When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.

⁴²So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.

⁴³But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,

⁴⁴and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.

⁴⁵For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

For them to ask Jesus to do whatever they ask sounds a bit pushy to me. In fact, Jesus had just mentioned the reality of his own pending death. That’s why they were on their way to Jerusalem.

James and John did not see that; rather they were focused on the glory.

And they probably meant their words to sound like, “Okay, something big is coming and we want a piece of the action. Here’s what we want you to do for us.” They wanted to be part of the In Crowd.

I’m in with the in crowd

And I know what the in crowd knows.

It was also arrogant. They claimed they could drink of the same cup and experience the same baptism as Christ did. Why not say that? It can't be that hard!

Arrogance often stems from ignorance or simple inexperience.

And the song continues:

*We make every minute count,
Our share is always the biggest amount.*

They wanted to be the big roosters in the hen house. And Jesus cut them down like a double-bit axe to an oak tree when he said the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.

And the reaction of the others? The scripture says they were 'angry' with James and John. Their anger could have come from several thoughts. Some could have thought, "Why didn't I think of that?" Others may have wondered, "Who do these two brothers think they are? What gives them the right....?"

I would like to think the other ten saw the lack of reverence in the brothers' request and intended to chastise them with brotherly love and help them see the error of their ways.

Probably not; they were just as human as James and John.

As an interesting point, this same story is told in Matthew, but it is not the two brothers who approach Jesus with this request, but the wife of Zebedee – the mother of James and John.

I guess they had Little League Soccer moms even back then.

And so, we have conflict and power plays; the beginnings of corruption in the church before the church was even started. How many of you have been in a church somewhere that was run like a club? A place where you had to look like the others, sound like them, talk like them; and maybe, just maybe, you would be welcome into their midst. A place where one had to earn the right to be there.

But back to Mark's gospel, God has a way of emphasizing things to us. Often, He does it by showing us contrasting ideas. James and John assumed an exclusive claim to righteousness and they wanted recognition.

Bartimaeus, on the other hand, who definitely was not part of the elite, recognized that only Jesus was righteous.

And all that Bartimaeus wanted was to see. Perhaps James and John were the ones who were blind. Blind in a spiritual sense. And there were others in the crowd who wanted to be identified with Jesus as well. The scripture gives the impression that many people wanted to walk along with Jesus and be SEEN with Jesus.

Can you picture a middle school playground? Next to the rusty backstop behind home plate, there's a bunch of kids standing around a solitary baseball bat and one lonely baseball and a pile of old, worn-out gloves. Two boys stand on opposite sides of the crowd and one of them is the most popular kid in school. We see that they are choosing sides for what they think will be the hottest ball game in town and who do you think they all want to be chosen by?

The brothers, James and John just don't get it. They're looking for the wrong thing. But, Bartimaeus understands! Jesus had just encountered the rich young ruler and had told the crowd the first shall be last. Were the brothers listening? And yet, the brothers' request came along as though these two men were just bursting to approach Jesus.

So, what about the crowd surrounding Bartimaeus? How did they react to the cries of this poor blind man? They tried to shut him out. After all, he's not one of the in crowd. He's in the way. Probably blind because he committed some sin or something. Whatever the cause of his blindness, he probably had it coming. No one seemed to be willing to help him. He was just an annoyance, a pest. Jesus has better things to attend to.

But, Bartimaeus will not be quiet. He speaks out. The blind beggar on the fringes of society will not be quiet. He was determined to overcome obstacles to his faith. A good lesson for us; a lesson from a blind man. He doesn't embellish his petition with details, he simply says, "Son of David have mercy on me!" He doesn't try to bargain or bribe or negotiate. It's just a matter of raw reality.

And Jesus eventually hears him. Not the first time, but only because the man persists. We have seen in our own lifetime, how the first cries for mercy and justice so often go unnoticed. And who are the ones telling you to be quiet? Usually the rich and powerful, the guardians of the status quo.

Have you ever noticed how often Jesus is outside the status quo at the fringes of society? Rarely do we see him at the center of established power.

When Jesus finally hears him, notice that he does not admonish the crowd, the ones who were trying to silence Bartimaeus. He doesn't tell them to be quiet nor does he try to point out their own lack of faith. He just stops and says, "Call him."

The mood of the crowd changes drastically. They are suddenly polite and encouraging. It could be because they know Jesus is watching them. When the head guy is watching, it counts to be on your best behavior.

Or maybe, just maybe, the crowd is actually transformed. Maybe they became witnesses to Jesus' mercy.

At any rate, the crowd seemed to be easily swayed. What had been a social pest was now the center of attention because Jesus made him the center. You know, Jericho is not that far from Jerusalem. I wonder how many in this crowd were there when they demanded the release of Barabbas? Were they as easily swayed then as now?

The crowd knows that Jesus is watching, but they are watching Jesus as well. In the blink of an eye, someone who was on the outside is now on the inside. For the moment, many changed their minds as to what was important. The bandwagon approach, it has been called. We see it all the time; every time something is advertised – others like it, I guess I should jump on board. Bandwagon or amazing grace; you decide what the crowd was doing.

What attracted Bartimaeus to Jesus? Do you suppose he had the whole story, the story about Jesus? I doubt it. How did he even know about him? Let's face it, he was blind. How could he have sought him out? We have all heard about how when one of the senses are lost, the others are heightened. I'm sure he heard much in the way of gossip and spoken news in the streets. In the first chapter of Mark, we read about Jesus casting out a demon from a man outside the synagogue in Capernum. Later, he cured a leper, and healed many. Try to keep that kind of news from spreading!

And the man called him 'Son of David!' Unlike Luke and Matthew, Mark's gospel does not list the genealogy of Jesus. In fact, this is the first time in Mark's gospel that he is referred to as 'Son of David.'

So, Bartimaeus knew something; we're not sure how, but he did. His theology was flawed, only because he did not have the whole story of salvation, but his faith was obvious. No doubt, the disciples had more of the story, but all they wanted was glory. It bears repeating; perhaps they were more blind than Bartimaeus.

How blind are we? What is our biggest obstacle to faith? It is probably the same one that afflicted the two brothers; the obstacle of pride. C.S. Lewis says that pride is the biggest forerunner of sin. Pride, he says, is always a matter of comparison. We say we are proud to be strong or smart or beautiful. Compared to what? We are proud to be stronger, smarter, or more beautiful than someone else.

James and John did not see this. They did not speak for the whole group. Indeed, hidden from view was the fact that they wanted to be more important than the others.

The lyrics tell us:

*We breeze up and down the street;
We get respect from the people we meet*

But, Bartimaeus had it right. He wasn't asking for more grits on his plate, or brighter clothes, or a place of honor. His first words were, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

He came not with pride, but with the expectation that he can and will be healed.

When Jesus finally heard him, he asked the man, "What do you want me to do for you?" Notice how Jesus words sounded similar to his earlier response to the two brothers. I am sure the brothers witnessed first-hand the exchange between Jesus and the blind man. It was a well taught lesson and the blindness was used for the glory of God.

But did Jesus really need to ask? Couldn't he see that the man was blind? Why would he ask such a question? Just heal the man, Jesus! Why the delay?

Is it because God wants a dialog with us? Comparing this gospel to the others, we know that Mark has a habit of practicing economy of words. The other three gospels, especially John, give us much more detail about what Jesus said and the people around him. I have a feeling that Bartimaeus and Jesus had a bit more conversation than what we see in these verses.

And Jesus takes no claim or credit for himself but gives full credit to the man's faith.

Beyond the healing, there is another lesson in this story. Bartimaeus is the model of the one thing needed for every type of discipleship. There is no such thing as silent disciples. Bartimaeus had the capacity to break the silence, to go against the grain, to swim against the tide. He just didn't know it until that day outside of Jericho.

Of course, Jesus knew what the man needed. But giving utterance to the deepest feelings of your heart opens the door for real discourse. God knows your heart, but he wants to hear us say it. You may be in love with someone, but they want to hear you say it. God wants us to have a running dialog with him; to hang out with him. He wants to respond to our faith by asking, "What can I do for you?"

When Jesus called him, Bartimaeus left his cloak and came running. Discarding his cloak has so many symbolic meanings. He gave up what was his one primary possession. It also symbolizes giving up his previous life.

And when it's all said and done, what does Bartimaeus do? He leaves his beggar's life and follows Jesus. He hangs out with him, thankful for the blessing of sight, not the pride of club membership. I'm sure there was a lot more said on the road to Jerusalem. I wonder how many other silences did Bartimaeus break?

The blind man went through the stages of discipleship right there on the spot. It started with need, then gratitude, then loyalty; leaving the in crowd standing there, as they controlled and possessed – nothing.

When we follow Jesus, we will encounter the lame, the blind, those on the fringes. Don't be afraid to step out of the crowd and into the fringes; you'll find good company. Listen closely and you may encounter someone saying mercifully to someone else, "What can I do for you?"

Is it your voice?

Amen.