

Sermon for Proper 20B

October 25, 2015

St. Mark's Episcopal Church (Alexandria, Va.)

Mark 10:46-52

What Do You Want Me To Do For You?

I'm a Tiger Scout leader. What this means is that I try to wrangle about a dozen first graders. One thing I've done...or maybe not done too well...is to teach them about orienteering. We were on a campout, and one of their advancement requirements is to learn how to use a compass. But the problem is, the kids get so focused on the compass, but they don't know which way they are supposed to be pointed. And some of the kids really have no desire to learn to use a compass, and give up.

And I think we struggle with that, as well. Too often, we don't know which way we're supposed to be pointed in life. And if we happen to know the direction, too often we're unwilling to do what is required to get there. It is a question of direction, and of will. That is the question that today's Gospel reading presents us.

Where are you headed? And what are you willing to do, to get there?

The healing of blind Bartimaeus in the 10th chapter of Mark is absolutely critical for the story line of this Gospel as a whole. Immediately after this reading, after Bartimaeus is healed and follows Jesus on the way, we get to chapter 11 and the Triumphal Entry, with the palms, which we celebrate on Palm Sunday. That's just to give you a sense of where we are in the story.

In our readings these past few weeks we've been traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem. Jesus is traveling headlong into his death. And he's been trying to tell his disciples about this all along, time and time again. He tells them "the Son of Man will suffer...he will be handed over to death..." and the disciples don't get it. Again and again we see the disciples being blind to Jesus' true message, to his true

mission. And, fittingly enough, at the beginning of the journey back in Mark chapter 8 there is a healing of a blind man.

And now we come to the last leg of the journey, Jericho. Jericho is the last stop in the plains before you climb the hills to Jerusalem. It is a one-day's walk from Jericho to Jerusalem. This is, literally, Jesus' last stop on the way to his suffering and death and the events of Holy Week.

And here, at this last stop, we have a healing of a blind man, Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus. And, Bartimaeus is connected to the events of Holy Week. We hear him call out "Son of David, have mercy on me!" In a sense, we'll here that same phrase from the mouths of those in Jerusalem as they cry out "hosanna, hosanna, to the Son of David." Bartimaeus, and what happens to him, is intimately linked to what is going to happen in Jerusalem.

And the irony of the story is that the disciples have been walking with Jesus, and learning from him, but have been blind to his mission and identity. And here is Bartimaeus, the beggar. He, though blind, sees Jesus. Jesus goes walking by, and it seems that Bartimaeus is the only one...the only one...who sees Jesus for who he truly is.

Though blind, he is able to see.

So, Bartimaeus anticipates Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. But, more importantly, he culminates the journey from Galilee. Bartimaeus stands as the culmination of three different encounters that Jesus had with people who misunderstand who he is and what he is about.

The first is with the rich young ruler, which we read two weeks ago. He comes to Jesus and says "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" It seems like he is pointed in the right direction. He isn't asking Jesus for more stuff, or for an easier life...he is asking the big question. But what's the problem? He refuses to leave behind his baggage. He can't let go of whatever it is to serve and follow Jesus. For him, it was his possessions. But for us it may be something else. Don't we all have something that keeps us

from following Jesus. Don't we all have something that we're unwilling to let go of? Things that we hold on to and see as more important than eternal life itself? Maybe it is our reputation? Or our job? Or our own self-righteousness?

We do this too often. We want to follow Jesus, we want to be with him, but we fail to let go of those things in our life that hold us back. So, the rich young ruler doesn't get to go along on the journey, even though his compass is pointed in the right direction.

The second encounter is with the disciples themselves, and read about this last week. Peter says "we've left everything to follow you. We left it all behind. So, we're in good shape, right?" They are willing to let everything go, but what we find out from James and John – the sons of Zebedee. They say "Lord, we want you to do something for us." And Jesus says, "What would you like me to do for you?" The exact same thing he says to Bartimaeus. What would you like me to do for you?

"Lord, we would like to sit on your right hand and on your left, when you come into your glory." So they've left everything, they've left their baggage behind, but their compass is pointed in the opposite direction from where they need to be going. It's not pointing toward Jerusalem. It's not pointing to the self-sacrificial love of Jesus. Their needle is pointing toward power, and authority, and their own self-righteousness. That's where their needle is pointing.

You have to have both things, don't you? You have to be willing to let go of your baggage, to let go of all the things that keep you from following Jesus. And you also need to be going in the right direction. The rich young ruler was pointed in the right direction, but couldn't take the first step. And James and John took the first step, but they aren't headed in the right direction.

Finally, the third encounter is Bartimaeus at the gates of Jericho. A blind beggar, who is able to see Jesus for who he really is.

And Bartimaeus is able to get both parts right.

So Jesus calls Bartimaeus. Now look at the verbs here. They are active. He doesn't just take off his cloak, he throws it off. He doesn't just stand up, he springs to his feet. That is the response Jesus is looking for. Throw off all the baggage, throw off all the pain and the hurt and the self righteousness, throw off all that is holding us back, and run after him

You might be thinking that Bartimeaus had an easy choice. He was a blind beggar, so who wouldn't take Jesus up on his offer? We all have times in our lives when we are just as blind, and just as happy to sit there in our self pity, and aren't willing to get up. But Bartimeaus has the courage to get up.

He has the courage to spring to his feet and run after Jesus. He has the courage to start a new life and accept the possibility that God wants good things for his life.

We all have times when we sit at the gate of Jericho, blind, with our hands out, bemoaning all the ways that life has gone wrong for us. Throw it off. Throw it off. Spring to your feet and run to the Lord who calls you.

Then, he gets the second part right as well. He is asked the same question as James and John. "What do you want me to do for you?" Notice, Bartimaeus doesn't say "I want my sight back." I think too often that's what we say, that's what we want from Jesus. When things have gone wrong, when we have been hurt, when we're sitting there like blind beggars, we want our old lives back. We want things back the way they were. We want our sight back.

But that's not what Bartimaeus asks for. He doesn't say, "I want my sight back." What does he say? "I want to see again."

Do you hear the subtle - and glorious - difference between those two? Between, "I want my sight back" and "I want to see again?" I want to know a future, again. I don't want to be trapped in the past at the gates of Jericho. I want to see the future in Jerusalem. I want to see the new life taking root in me

and taking the place of the old. I want to see you, Jesus, and your love for me. I want to see your glory, Jesus.

That is what Bartimaeus wishes to see, again.

Bartimaeus is the hope of the disciples, those blind men. Because in the light of the cross and the resurrection their eyes will be opened. The angel will say to the disciples at the empty tomb, “go to Galilee...there you will see him.”

In the light of Christ’s victory we begin to see, truly, for the first time.

Bartimaeus is our model and our hope. Like him, will we throw off all that is holding us back? And, like him, will we allow our compasses to point not in the direction of self, but in self-giving. In the direction of the self-giving love of Christ Jesus.

And so, I hope, that you can hear these questions from the Gospel. What do you want Jesus to do for you? Have you asked yourself that recently? What is it, exactly...most deeply...most eternally...what is it that you want Jesus to do for you? I hope it’s good! And I hope you’re ready to follow when you figure out the answer.

Amen.