



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### **Pentecost 23 – Proper 25 (B)**

#### **What Do You Want Me to Do for You?**

**[RCL] Jeremiah 31:7-9; Psalm 126; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52**

Who doesn't love blind Bartimaeus? Here is a man who knows what he wants and goes after it no matter how much he embarrasses everyone else. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" he shouts. His fellow townspeople are mortified. "Shut up!" they say. "Be quiet, you hollering maniac! The one celebrity we get in this town and you yell at him like a yokel!" Bartimaeus doesn't care. He knows Jesus has what he needs and he is going after it. He will not be silenced. We could learn a lot about boldness in prayer from Bartimaeus. We could learn a lot about asking for what we need.

But even more important than Bartimaeus' persistence in this gospel is Jesus' response to him. Bartimaeus is hollering and causing a ruckus, and "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?'"

This is one of the most important moments in the entirety of the gospels for telling us about who Jesus is. Jesus does not assume that Bartimaeus wants to be made able to see. He does not assume that Bartimaeus sees his blindness as a disability. Furthermore, although Jesus undoubtedly knows what is best for Bartimaeus, Jesus does not force it on him. Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?"

Neither does Jesus impose his will on us, or make any assumptions about what we need or want. He asks us as openly as he asks Bartimaeus: "What do you want me to do for you?"

Just by asking this one question, Jesus provides us with a mechanism to delve deeper spiritually. It's a deceptively simple question. On the surface, it seems like a matter of value exchange. What can we earn or get from our relationship with Jesus? But if we spend time with this question we find new truths opening up within ourselves.

Let's sit with the question ourselves. Jesus asks us, "What do you want me to do for you?"

Well, first off, Jesus, it would be great if you could make our churches successful.

Is that really what we want? He asks us again, "What do you want me to do for you?"

Could you magically make all our money and membership worries go away?

Again, that would be great, but that's not really what we truly want at the bottom of our hearts. We know because he's asking us again, "What do you want me to do for you?"

Okay, we'll try again. Jesus, could you make our ministries a success? No, that doesn't feel right either.

"What do you want me to do for you?"

Could you make us successful as disciples and ministers? No, still not it. We're starting to dig through the layers of our ego as Jesus continues to ask us this pivotal question. If we dig deep enough, maybe we'll hit our hearts.

"What do you want me to do for you?"

Help us to do more, to try harder, to do better, we say to Jesus. Getting closer to the truest desire of our hearts, but not there yet.

"What do you want me to do for you?" Help us to love people more, to love people better?

Very close, but he asks us one more time with such gentleness in his voice: "What do you want me to do for you?"

"My teacher, let me see."

Bartimaeus' words become our words. Let us see how loved we are, let us see how hungry for love others are, how worthy of love they are, how precious and beautiful and wonderful our neighbors are. And let us see that all this love comes from you, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and God the Creator, and the indwelling Holy Spirit. "My teacher, let me see."

Digging down through all the immediate superficial answers, down through fear and ego and all the concerns of this world, we find the desire at the core of our being, which is the desire to give and receive love, the desire to give and receive God. "My teacher, let me see." Let us see that below all the noise and through all the distractions and beyond all the divisions that can isolate us from one another is the Presence that outlasts the stars. That is what we want you to do for us, Jesus. Let us see the Love. And then let us share it.

Bartimaeus occupies a unique niche in the gospel: his is both a healing story and a call story. It is his healing that enables his call and it is his call that is the final ingredient of his healing. "Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way."

This is worth a very close look in our own lives, this relationship between healing and call, how very short a distance there is between the two, how intermingled they are. Often we feel unequipped to answer the call

Jesus places in our lives, too broken and mixed up, sinful or apathetic or trapped in a net of responsibilities and habits that seems inescapable, even for gospel work. How could someone as “unhealed” as we are do something radical for Jesus?

But we do not have to wait for healing to answer Jesus’ call. Bartimaeus doesn’t. The people in the crowd say, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.’ So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.” Still blind, relying on no guidance from the people around him to feel his way, reacting with joy and abandon, he throws away his cloak and goes to Jesus.

This is not an insignificant moment. Bartimaeus was homeless, a blind beggar on the street. His cloak was his only asset. It was his only protection from the weather and the cold, the closest thing to shelter he had. He cast it away without a second thought, and still blind, still unhealed, answers the call to make his way to Jesus. We can do the same.

And in perhaps the most remarkable turn in this remarkable story, Bartimaeus is not the only one healed and called in this story. Did you catch who else had a radical conversion? The crowd. They begin with cruelty and exclusion in their hearts, doing everything they can to keep Bartimaeus away from Jesus: “Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’” And this is the pivotal moment. Jesus does not call Bartimaeus directly. *He calls the crowd to call Bartimaeus.* “Jesus stood still and said, ‘Call him here.’”

And then the redemption, so easy to skip over if you’re not paying close attention. “And they called the blind man, saying to him, ‘Take heart; get up, he is calling you.’” This is the moment of the crowd’s conversion, the crowd’s healing, and the crowd’s call. Jesus’ love is so sneaky and so powerful that it broke open their hardened hearts and they probably didn’t even notice it. They go from trying to keep people away from Jesus to urging them forward. They go from seeing Bartimaeus as an embarrassment and trying to shut him up and keep him hidden, to telling him to take heart and go forward into Jesus’ embrace.

What we learn here is that call is never individual. We hear call in community. Bartimaeus calls for Jesus, Jesus calls the crowd, the crowd calls Bartimaeus, then Jesus calls Bartimaeus to follow him on the way. This entire process of call and response is deeply healing to everyone involved.

Where do we start? We listen, and we call out to Jesus, just as Bartimaeus did: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Because he is always calling and always healing. And it begins with his simple question to us: “What do you want me to do for you?” So we take Bartimaeus’ words to our hearts, “Teacher, let me see.”

*This sermon was written by **the Rev. Canon Whitney Rice** for Proper 25 (B) in 2021.*