



"He is Calling You"
Scripture – Mark 10:46-52
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, October 24, 2021

Before I read the Scripture Lesson, I think it might be helpful if we spend some time re-tracing our steps.

For a while now, Jesus has been on the move. At the start of this central section of Mark's Gospel, which focuses on themes of discipleship, Jesus was in Bethsaida. And, then, he traveled to Caesarea Philippi. And, after that, Jesus hiked up a mountain, where he was transfigured before Peter and James and John. And along the way — as Jesus led the Twelve all over 'Kingdom Come' — he explained to his disciples what it means to *follow*. Not literally, of course; they seemed to be keeping pace with this nomadic rabbi. But figuratively. He taught them what the Way of Jesus entails. He explained where this journey would lead: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (8:34).

Jesus has been clear about what lies ahead, saying three times in as many chapters that the Messiah will suffer and die and rise again. And, still, the very disciples whom Jesus summoned from their nets don't quite get it. At the beginning of chapter 10, Jesus turns southward, traveling toward Judea, traveling toward the cross. And, as he and his followers are on the road to Jerusalem, James and John step forward. "Teacher! Teacher!" they call.

"What is it you want me to do for you?" Jesus responds. And, with unbecoming boldness, James and John make their request: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory," they ask (10:37).

James and John know where this road will lead. The disciples have learned they must traverse the rugged terrain of suffering and shame before finally reaching the garden of gladness. And still — still! — James and John ask for glory. They definitely don't get it. The disciples have been given a roadmap, but they are having trouble following the Way of Jesus. At this point in the Gospel, Jesus is nearing the end of the road. In chapter 11, Jesus will ride a donkey into Jerusalem as the crowds lay down palms and shout "Hosanna!" After that, it will only be a handful of days before Jesus carries his cross to Calvary. His death is imminent. Very soon it will be up to the likes of James and John and the other disciples to carry on the work Christ has begun. If we didn't know that the church would be proclaiming the Gospel some 2,000 years later, we might be a little worried about the people to whom Jesus is entrusting his ministry.

But, then, there is one disciple we have yet to meet ... Just before Jesus rides into the holy city, he takes an unexplained detour to Jericho, about 20 miles northeast of Jerusalem. And there, on the outskirts of town, Jesus encounters a man named Bartimaeus. This is his story.

They 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. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "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!" 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?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

"As [Jesus] and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside."

Bartimaeus was not *on the road*, but *by the roadside*. Like many of the beggars we meet in the Gospels, Bartimaeus is sitting along the main thoroughfare, most likely beside the city gate where laborers going out to the fields or merchants coming into market would pass him by. But, unlike the workers and tradespeople on the road, Bartimaeus cannot participate in the routines of daily life. He is a blind man in a society ill-equipped to include those of differing abilities. So — with no other means of making money — Bartimaeus spends his days by the roadside, begging for mercy from those traveling along the road. He is literally relegated to the sidelines. As one scholar so aptly put it: Bartimaeus "is a liminal character: outside of the city, outside of the path ... and outside of the economy."¹ And yet, somehow, this person on the outside has insider information. Bartimaeus knows who Jesus is. And not just because he's caught wind of Jericho's notable visitor. Not just because the chatter of the crowd has clued him in that Jesus is passing by. No, Bartimaeus intuits something about this Jesus — something no one else in the Gospel of Mark has yet confessed. Bartimaeus knows that Jesus is the Son of David; he knows Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, come to set his people free. So he shouts: "Jesus, *Son of David*, have mercy on me!"

For reasons the Gospel writer leaves us to imagine, the crowd finds the beggar's pleas unnerving. Many sternly order Bartimaeus to be quiet, but he cries out even more loudly: "Son of David, have mercy on me!" And when Bartimaeus repeats his petition, Jesus responds: "Call him here." So Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and runs to Jesus. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks the blind man. It is the same question he posed to James and John only 15 verses earlier. But the answer Jesus receives is completely different. Unlike the brothers, who request status and glory, the beggar wants only mercy. Bartimaeus trusts the Messiah can transform his life. So he *asks* the Messiah: "My teacher, let me see again." And, immediately, Jesus responds: "Go; your faith has made you well." With a word, Bartimaeus regains his sight. But he does not go on *his* way, as Jesus instructed. Instead, Bartimaeus follows Jesus *on the way*. The one whose story begins on the side of the road, now walks on the road — following the way of Jesus, following the way of the cross.

Most people would describe this as a healing story ... hence the heading it receives in many Bibles: *The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus*. But, I would argue it's better classified as a *call* story. For Bartimaeus models for us what it means to follow Jesus. Despite his blindness, Bartimaeus alone sees clearly who Jesus is. Despite the many things he likely needs, he asks only for mercy. Then, when the Son of David summons him, Bartimaeus casts off his cloak and springs up to go to Jesus. Unlike the rich young man whose story we heard two weeks ago — the one who

¹ Luis Menéndez-Antuña, "Commentary on Mark 10:46-52" (2021), www.workingpreacher.org.

refuses to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor — Bartimaeus gives up the one thing he owns. He throws away the only shred of comfort he has to sleep on, the only garment he has to shelter him from rain or cold. And he does so joyfully, freely — an expression of his whole-hearted commitment to the One he trusts to transform his life. Yes, this is a call story. Bartimaeus heeds the call of Christ, becoming the last disciple choosing to join the Way before Jesus enters Jerusalem.

But did you notice that Bartimaeus is not the only one called in this story? Before Jesus speaks with Bartimaeus, he calls those who are on the road with him. He says to *them* — perhaps to the Twelve, perhaps to those who shushed Bartimaeus, perhaps to the whole crowd — Jesus says to *them*: “Call him here.” Call him here. He does not summon Bartimaeus directly. Rather, Jesus commands those who are already following him to call the blind man over. And so *they* speak to Bartimaeus, saying: “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” Jesus calls those who are already following him to participate in calling another. And not just any Other. They participate in calling a man who some among them have relegated to the sidelines, a man who many among them have tried to silence, a man who most would dismiss as undeserving or ill-suited for discipleship. But, in conveying the call of Christ, they become instruments of the mercy of Christ. And, in inviting this unlikely candidate to join them on the road, they discover more fully what it means to follow the way of Jesus.

The Call of Bartimaeus is the last story Mark narrates before Jesus enters Jerusalem. The cross looms on the horizon, but — still — Jesus calls; through the voice of his followers, he summons Bartimaeus. It’s as if Jesus is preparing his disciples to carry on without him — reminding them that the work must continue; reminding them that the responsibility of calling new disciples will soon fall to them. It’s as if Jesus is teaching his disciples about the expansive nature of his ministry — reminding them that, sometimes, unlikely disciples respond with unexpected faith and faithfulness. It’s a valuable lesson for the first disciples of Jesus. And it’s a valuable lesson for us.

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Earlier this year I came across a news story about some *unlikely* disciples. That word was actually in the headline: “A high school student needed help with tuition, so an *unlikely* group stepped up.”² That *unlikely* group was a cohort of inmates incarcerated at Soledad State Prison in California.

The story begins with a cooperative prison-school book group called Exercises in Empathy. As part of this program, students from a local Catholic High School would take regular trips to the prison to read and discuss books with inmates who were working on self-improvement. Through rich conversations, the participants in this program would often form surprising connections. But no one ever imagined the inmates would come together to support a student in this way. It was a book that inspired them. They were reading about a group of prisoners of war who banded together and took care of each other while they were in the camp. During their discussion, something clicked: One of the inmates leaned over to another and said, ‘we need to take care of these young men’ (*paraphrase*). So they decided to raise money to fund a student’s education. The coordinator of the program, who was the director of campus ministry at the school, recommended they support a young man named Sy whose family could no longer afford tuition due to a health crisis.

As the headline said, it was an unlikely group that stepped up to support Sy. But their fundraising feat was even more remarkable. You see, some prisoners get paid as little as 8 cents an hour for their daily labor. And they need the money they earn to buy things like toothpaste and deodorant, which the state doesn’t provide. But,

² “A high school student needed help with tuition, so an unlikely group stepped up: Prison inmates,” *The Washington Post* (January 2021).

despite their meager resources, the inmates banded together to raise \$24,000 over three years — enough to fund Sy's tuition. Now, this is not a story about faith. The article did *not* report that the inmates' generosity was a response of faith ... though, for some, I expect it was. But, still, I see it as a story about unlikely disciples who demonstrated unexpected faithfulness. Because — whether or not the inmates identify as followers of Christ — they are furthering the way of Christ. Like Bartimaeus, they are giving joyfully, freely — with a whole-hearted commitment to the community they have formed. I see it as a story about the expansive nature of the ministry Christ sets in motion. Because — instead of dismissing or discounting this unlikely group, as many of us would be quick to do — the coordinator of the program recognized the inmates' desire to serve, and echoed the call of Jesus's followers: "Take heart; get up, he is calling you."

Jesus summons all kinds of disciples to follow him on the way. It is a valuable reminder for disciples of Jesus — especially those of us who have been following him for months or years or, even, decades. Jesus summons all kinds of people:

Whether established followers at the center of a congregation's life, or those who have found themselves sidelined or silenced, discounted or dismissed.

Whether we ask the right questions or the wrong ones.

Whether we have surprising insight or we just don't get it.

No matter who we are there is a place for all of us on the road; there is room for all of us on the way. Christ calls us to draw the circle wider, to summon others to participate in his ministry, to say to others: "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." And, sometimes, sometimes, we will be surprised by the unexpected acts of faith and faithfulness that answer that call.

Prayers of the People – David Robertson

Merciful and Gracious God, we lift up our hearts to you in a moment of prayer together. Bring us apart for awhile from the pressure and clamor of our daily life, and refresh us with the vitality of your Holy Spirit. Open our minds to new insights and challenge us to reach beyond our experience to the growing edge of faith. Keep us ever mindful of the church's mission to forge ahead into the future with the boldness of a prophet and the determination of a pioneer. Help us to shape a church that is dynamic and persuasive. A powerful witness for hope in the midst of nagging cynicism and despair. Help us to proclaim a church that is a shining beacon of love, blotting out the shadows of hatred, prejudice, and injustice. Help us to be a church that celebrates the diversity of its people, affirming their uniqueness and utilizing their creative energies. Remind us that we are special people with glorious good news. Let us rejoice and be glad!

In our times of joy, you are there to share the happiness – to experience the eager celebration – to savor the golden moments that etch themselves in memory. In our times of doubt, you are there to help us sift through the choices that confront us – to calculate the impact of our decisions – to bring us through the fog of fuzzy thinking to the sunshine of firm resolution. In our times of quiet desperation, you are the compass that keeps us on course – the safety valve that relieves the pressure when the world seems too much with us – the life support system that enables us to go on when we feel we've reached the limit of our endurance. In our times of distress, you are there with consolation, embracing our sorrow with tender concern – you are there with compassion,

being sensitive to the pain and hurt – you are there with comfort, wiping away the bitter tears and guiding us through our private agony.

O Lord, you are, indeed, abundant in your mercy. So often we take that for granted – as though it required no effort on our part. But it does! Your mercy is the spark that kindles our flame of gratitude. You give to us; we must give back. Empower us for service – make us bold in our witness and radiant in our living.

All this we pray in the strong name of Christ Jesus our Lord, who shared with his disciples and with us this prayer of profound faith:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen.