

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Jeremiah 31:7-9, Mark 10:46-52

TAKE HEART

When I was in seminary, one of my classmates was visually impaired. Instead of using a seeing-eye dog, Wesley used a white cane to feel his way around campus. He occasionally got off track heading somewhere he didn't really want to go and someone would need to quickly go over to gently tell him where he was, so a different course could be found. He faced significant challenges, not just maneuvering across campus, but facing a curriculum that was demanding in many ways. I worked for Wesley a number of hours each week. Many of our seminary text books were not available in Braille, so I would read his assignments into an adjustable-speed tape recorder, so he could listen to them more quickly than I read them. It was much easier for me to go to his room on campus to do this work than for him to have come to me, so that's how we worked it. We make certain accommodations for those who have these kinds of needs.

That's one of the reasons why I find this healing story in the Gospel of Mark interesting. Although it would have been easier for Jesus to go to this man who was blind, he asks Bartimaeus to come to him. Actually, instead of telling him directly what he wanted him to do, Jesus asks the crowd to tell the man to come to him. That does not seem to be the easiest or most sensitive way for the story to have played out. What is going on here?

The encounter had begun when a crowd of people on pilgrimage to Jerusalem were going through the town of Jericho. The Passover observance would begin in a few days and Jesus was heading for the holy city for what would turn out to be the last time. This story takes place just before Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. As the crowd was leaving the town to head westward toward Jerusalem, there was someone sitting next to the road, who was begging. The blind man is seeking alms from people who might be likely to respond. But when he hears about someone named Jesus passing by, he begins to cry out for mercy. Whatever Bartimaeus had heard about Jesus leads him to be quite insistent in calling out to him. He even calls him by a messianic title, Son of David. It is not initially clear whether his calls for mercy are a request for a donation, an expressed wish for forgiveness, or a plea for healing. The man, who perhaps had built up some survival skills as someone who kept body and soul together through begging, repeatedly and loudly calls for Jesus' attention.

Those who were traveling with Jesus took it upon themselves to show the man no mercy – they order him to quiet down. Perhaps they would have made good Presbyterians, who tend to want encounters to take place in a decent and orderly way. “Mr. Bartimaeus, if you have a request, please send a letter to the Session which will refer it to a committee, and we'll send you a reply in the mail in a few months. Perhaps you can find someone who would read it to you. In the mean time, pipe down.” But the crowd's efforts end up having the opposite effect on Bartimaeus. Instead of hushing him up, he gets louder and even more insistent in his urgent calls. “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

That's when Jesus stops and tells those traveling with him to call for the man who is blind to come to him. Now we begin to see why Jesus did not go to him. He not only wanted to bless Bartimaeus with vision, he also wanted his fellow travelers to clearly see what their role was to be. This is more than just a healing story. Earlier in the gospel account, Jesus' disciples had discouraged adults from bringing their young children to him because they thought there were more important things for him to be doing. But Jesus clearly did not want an entourage that hushed people up and kept them away. So he tells those with him what their proper response would be and he gets them to put it into practice by calling Bartimaeus to come to him. Jesus not only gets them to do an about face on their actions - perhaps their whole mindset is transformed. For instead of trying to keep the man in his place, they tell him to take heart, to get up, because Jesus was calling him.

Bartimaeus already had shown quite a bit of heart, calling out so that his needs would not be ignored, growing even stronger of voice when he was told to quiet down. He challenged these people of faith to show some mercy for someone in dire need. Yes, Bartimaeus had heart. But then, he must have been all the more heartened when Jesus called for him to come to him. He then hears the voice of Jesus asking him, “What do you want me to do for you?” Do you remember that question from our gospel lesson last week? It was the same exact question Jesus had addressed to his disciples, James and John, when they had approached him. But their response, saying they wanted to be given the top seats of honor when Jesus came into his glory, was not received as positively as was a poor beggar’s request, which was not simply for alms, but was to regain his sight. Bartimaeus was heartened enough to express his primary need and his request was welcomed because it coincided with the heart of the gospel as an expression of mercy that would lead to wholeness for the person in need and a correction in course for the traveling community of faith.

Today is Reformation Sunday. For those of us who embrace the Protestant tradition, this is a time for remembrance, celebration, and recommitment. Like the early reformers of the 16th century, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and others, we are to look carefully at this institution we call the church, and then judge just how closely we are following the way of our Lord Jesus. We say we believe that God is sovereign, that the risen Christ is living, and that the power of the Holy Spirit continues to make all things new. So we are Reformed, not just by our ties to a reformation movement that began almost 500 years ago – we continue to be reformed by the Spirit of God that enables us to envision what it means to follow Jesus today. Yes, we affirm that we are being healed again and again to see things in new ways, in fresh ways - that we are constantly being called to jump up, to throw off the comfortable cloaks of the blind past, and to follow Jesus enthusiastically and gratefully into the unknown dangers and the unimaginable opportunities of that which is yet to come. And yes, we ought to be able to see that Jesus wants us to hear and respond to the voices of others in need, letting them know that a transformational encounter with our Lord is possible because we ourselves have had one. People of faith face new challenges in each age, but take heart! For if those challenges cause us to try to get closer to Jesus’ heart, then we’ll be right where we belong as people who have been given the vision and the heart that is at the core of our and others’ needs. Take heart! Amen.