

Text: Mark 10:46-52

Title: “Could the Blind lead the Blind?”

As I began this sermon, I was reminded that keeping oneself informed about world, national and local news can be exhausting. One theologian (prior to the computer age) said preaching needed to happen with the Scriptures in one hand and a newspaper in the other. I’m sure some of you will recall the name of that theologian. If so, you are invited to call it out now. [pause]  
Shouting seems a good introduction to our story from the Gospel of Mark about blind Bartimaeus,

Is there anything this story from antiquity can teach us today?

One wise person said

“The creative challenge of spiritual life is to know enough about the world to be informed and enough about God to be hopeful.”

(Arthur Schopenhauer-quoted in Marian Williamson: “Healing of America, p 214).

I suggest that we can learn a lot from Bartimaeus. While his story also appears in Matthew (20:29) and Luke (18:35), Mark’s is the only account giving him a name. Bar-timaeus, son of Timaeus, means son of honor. The root word refers to worth, dignity or strength.

That Mark implies these qualities in this man who makes his living by begging –by relying on the compassion of others is significant. Given the location - Jericho-full of danger and resistance fighters it was an excellent choice of venue for a healing.

[Scarcity of water probably exacerbated the problem of blindness in that time and place, because it was a common occurrence..]

Though Bartimaeus was shoved onto the fringes of life happening around him, he was intelligent-- clever enough to get Jesus’ attention as well as to appeal to Jesus’ sense of compassion and mercy.

“Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me” he shouts. When the disciples attempt to hush him, he persists and gets louder ....

“Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me.”

Identifying Jesus as son of David may have been his strategy for stopping Jesus. Since he was the first to use this phrase, he added a new dimension to Jesus’ identity, which even his closest disciples had not yet figured out. And they are running out of time because Jesus is on his final trip to Jerusalem.

Jesus not only hears the beggar, he stops!

A wise person once said,

“The first responsibility of love is to listen.” (Paul Tillich). Jesus knew how to listen: to God, to others, to himself. He uses that skill now and invites the disciples to bring the beggar to him. Bart in his enthusiasm tosses down his outer cloak, surely a necessity. His trust in Jesus must have been complete. He jumps up to go to this son of David. Jesus asks the same question he had asked of two of his disciples earlier....

“What is it you want me to do for you?”

Say again...  
What?  
Isn't it obvious?

Certainly WE WHO ARE SIGHTED assume Bart will ask for his sight.

Jesus shows respect to this man whom others have shoved to the margins, asking Bar-timaeus What he can do for him.

In responding to Jesus, Bartimaeus uses a form of address found in only two places in the New Testament.... Rhabbouni (vs. 51), meaning "Master" a step beyond teacher.

Respect is met with respect...

Honor is met with honor.

As Annie Dillard and others remind us (her stories of the early successful cataract surgeries )those who have been blind, then suddenly discover sight, have not all been equally exuberant as they gained their new sight. Some have experienced difficulty adjusting to the realities of sight, including negotiating a world appearing larger than they expected.

I've been reading about Barbara Brown Taylor's experience with the "Dialogue in the Dark" exhibit as she (an Episcopal priest) describes in one of her books (*Learning to Walk in the Dark*). A group of sighted people are introduced to a virtual tour of ordinary places like a grocery store or cafe, accompanied by sounds, scents, or even moving wind.

There is one difference. They do all this in the dark, armed only with a white cane and their ears listening for the voice of their guide who prompts the group to listen for their next instructions. Since the guides used in the exhibit are legally blind, it was billed on the web-site as the "place where the blind really do lead the blind."

At one point, Taylor is completely immobilized by fear when she's confronted with stepping down from a curb where the sound of horns blaring paralyzes her. At that moment she realizes how much a blind person carrying a white cane is vulnerable, absolutely at the mercy of the drivers of vehicles. She thought of the number of times she'd seen people checking their phones at an intersection before making a turn, and shivered.

This exhibit was born when an entrepreneur was asked to develop a Rehabilitation center for a friend who had become recently blind.

While researching for his project, the designer became aware, not only how much unsighted folks had to contend with in their daily activities, they must deal as well with folks with negative attitudes and contentious reactions to their un-sightedness.

The designer (Heinecke) realized he could help others to learn more empathy by taking his rehab center on the road. The exhibit and the accompanying empathic experience have been introduced in over 150 countries .

Taylor said new learnings emerged: [from her experience of acting as if she were blind]...

+ no one was embarrassed to be dependent upon anyone else.

+ There were black, Asian and white Americans in her group. No one could tell who was who. Nor could they tell who was young or old.

+ Since running into the person ahead of you, or stepping on their heels was happening regularly, TOUCH was an inevitable part of the experience, so apologies became redundant.

Barbara Brown Taylor wondered aloud as she wrote if this experience might be something churches could try.

The effort to lead us to a greater empathic spirit is another learning we can take away from this story of Jesus' response to the request for mercy. Jesus does not arrogantly talk down to Bartimaeus, rather puts him at his ease, asking another question of him.

Jesus does NOT belittle him. Rather Jesus takes the role of a servant, one who will intercede between God and human...

How are we doing with

Our learnings from Bar-timaeus thus far?

Bart is smart. He knows what he wants and who is able to give it, and he doesn't hesitate to ASK.

He appeals to Jesus' compassion and ability to show MERCY.

Those who've received MERCY are more likely to turn around and be merciful.

Jesus has shown mercy, a new community develops around that compassion and mercy. Though the disciples are often clueless about Jesus' identity, the person on the margin, at the side of the road, a blind son of Timaeus can "see" more clearly who Jesus is than those closest to him.

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One of the characters in a Kurt Vonnegut novel (Player PIANO) says:

"Out on the edge you can see all kinds of things you can't see from the center."

Walter Brueggeman, contemporary theologian and Old Testament scholar says: mercy is what makes all the difference. He thinks this Bartimaeus story continues a "wave of mercy" which begins in the Hebrew Scriptures. Brueggeman says:

"Whether the world knows it or not still the world waits for this tender mercy-even as it falls apart in greed and anger and anxiety."

I do not know how it is with you today. I have felt like blind Bartimaeus attempting to navigate through the uncertainties of our uncertain world.

My spiritual being knows that what is important is often what I do NOT SEE. My eyes often deceive me and are quick to make snap judgments.

In those moments of anxiety, I've called upon

"Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me."

I get in the way of my own healing by not paying attention some days.

I neglect acknowledging those persons I'm uncertain how to address...particularly those who do not have an address.

The visible differences do get in the way of actually seeing the identity of others as a child of God... Those who have been pushed to margins, to the side of the road...all who are vulnerable as they travel.

\*people who are fleeing violence in their homelands,

\*People who identify differently in gender from the former M/F categories.

\*The numbers of people who are feeling excluded grow constantly.

Is anyone listening? if indeed the first responsibility of Love is to listen?

There is good news for all of us.

The One who has shown us mercy continues to hear our pleas when we recognize and admit our blindnesses.

Thanks be to God for God's mercy.