

*Sermon for Proper 25, Year B
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Jesus is on his way from Galilee to Jerusalem. He has set himself toward his crucifixion. And as he travels through Jericho on the way to Jerusalem, the son of Timaeus accosts him. Actually, he simply sits on the side of the road and shouts. Bartimaeus is blind, and there is a great crowd around Jesus. There is no way that Bartimaeus could possibly get to Jesus to accost him. But he does the best he can: “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

There are two parts to the cry of Bartimaeus, and they are both crucial. In the first place, he calls Jesus “Son of David”. What does this mean? No one else seems to call him that. Jesus’ father was not named David. But Bartimaeus acknowledges him as the heir of David, the king. The people trying to hush up Bartimaeus weren’t just trying to maintain decorum and keep him in his social place. This is a politically charged statement. Jesus is the true king. He has a right to our allegiance before any other power or authority. He is our master, not the Romans, or the Herods, or the King of England, or the United States of America. All of these derive their authority from God, and we ought to submit to them, but not when they contradict our submission to Jesus.

The second part of Bartimaeus’ plea makes more sense once we understand the first. “Have mercy on me.” Mercy is an attribute of the powerful and authoritative. When you ask for mercy, you are already acknowledging an authority in the one from whom you ask it. But the request for mercy is also an honest acknowledgement of need. You don’t ask the court for mercy after you have just pled innocence. The innocent don’t need mercy, they simply need justice. It is the guilty who need mercy somehow mixed with their justice.

I think most of us are blind beggars, just like Bartimaeus. I think most of us hear that we ought to have a personal relationship with God and just roll our eyes. Either we don’t even think it’s possible, or we are crying out with the psalmist, “How long, O Lord? ... How long will you hide your face from me? How long shall I have perplexity in my mind?” And so we sit at the side of the road, eking out a meager spiritual life from the leavings of others, stumbling haphazardly through our relationships and occupations. We are blind to the reality of God’s work in our lives and to his will for us, helpless against the attacks of the enemy.

The prophet Isaiah writes about a similar situation: “Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not overtake us; we look for light, and behold, darkness, and for brightness, but we walk in gloom.” It’s important to remember that this passage from Isaiah comes after the great Servant passages. It looks ahead to address people who have already been saved by the Lord and his Servant. And yet, this blindness still persists. The reason is that wickedness still persists. Our sins have been dealt with ... in principle. Our healing has been accomplished ... in principle. But it will still have to be manifested in our own behavior. And that will be the work of a lifetime.

So the Isaiah passage applies to us. “Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear”. If there is something lacking in your relationship with God, if you don’t feel like you really communicate with him, if you don’t feel like he is really present in your life providing wisdom and direction, it doesn’t mean that there is something wrong with God. It is probably the case that “your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you”.

This is not to discourage further those who have experienced a real relationship with God and are simply going through a “dry spell” or something like what St. John of the Cross called “the Dark Night of the Soul”. There are such experiences. And they are not necessarily caused directly by our sin. Sometimes they are God’s way of drawing us further into holiness and absolute obedience. But these are also things that are only applicable to those who are already responding in love to God. They are most definitely solid food for the mature, not milk for beginners. They don’t let anybody off the hook. Rather, they set it more deeply.

For most of us, the solution to blindness will be the solution of Bartimaeus. We must cry out to Jesus, risking the charge of sedition in order to speak the truth, putting our whole life in his hands to do with what he wishes. We must admit our need, and ask for healing. And when they try to silence us, we must cry out all the louder. Notice that Bartimaeus is only beginning in this narrative. When he calls Jesus “Master,” he means it. Even after Jesus tells him “Go your way”, even after Jesus has given him what he wanted, he follows him. “Immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way.”

Bartimaeus has not only received sight, he has had his entire life changed. No longer will he sit by the road, blind and begging. But neither will he be his own master. It was in naming his master that he ceased to be blind. And the same will be true for us. In naming Jesus our master and giving up control of our own lives to him we will find our healing. But of course having a master entails seeking to please the master. And seeking to please the master entails knowing the master. And knowing our master entails prayer and study. Actually, prayer and simple attention will do, for starters. A simple, regular diet of scripture will do wonders.

But even before you begin to move down the road, remember that the solution of Bartimaeus is not a self-help solution. He is not the rich young man who asks, "What shall *I* do?" He is the beggar who simply requests help in the knowledge of his own unworthiness. "Have mercy on me." There is a world of difference between the two. The first is weak because of his power. The second receives power, because he is willing to be weak.

May we all have the willingness to be weak and the humility to submit to our humblest of all Lords. And may we seek to please him in everything that we do and everything that we say.