

“Learning from a Man Named Bartimaeus”

Matthew 10:46–52

(Dramatic Sermon)

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October 24, 2021

(enter singing with guitar to O Waly Waly) “Lord, I was blind, I could not see in your marred visage any grace: but now the beauty of your face in radiant vision dawns on me (William T. Matson, 1868).”

What do people say about you, do you know? What names might they call you to try to define you? And how do you feel about all of this? Is it accurate?

I know what people say about me. I am Blind Bartimaeus, as if Blind is my first name. Well, I’m not blind anymore, and while my blindness affected my experience in numerous and profound ways, blindness does not define me. I am a man who was blind, but now I see.

I am also the guy everyone thought of as being pushy. In my time, perhaps in yours too, it was okay to beg, but not to badger. A man like me was pitied, to an extent. I mean, people thought suffering was the result of sin, my blindness was probably my fault, but I was still suffering. I couldn’t earn an income. I couldn’t have a family because I couldn’t support them. All I could do was depend on the charity of others, but it was up to them to decide whether or not they wanted to help me. I was supposed to stand quietly to the side and accept what came to me with gratitude.

Well, I got the memo, but I didn’t always pay attention to it. Sometimes you have to speak up for yourself, be loud and proud to get what you need, even if it means people begin to label you as a troublemaker. Anyone who doesn’t understand this hasn’t been in need, at least not like me.

On this one occasion, I offended people more than usual because I was particularly loud. I had heard that Jesus of Nazareth was in town, my town, Jericho. It is one of the oldest cities in the world, if not the oldest, with settlements dating back 11,000 years from your time. And you think a couple hundred years is old... It’s the town the Israelites circled seven times on the seventh day, according to Joshua 6 (You remember that story, right?), before

they blew their trumpets, shouted, and the walls fell allowing them to take the city. So, shouting has a history there, a good history!

But I heard that Jesus was in town and realized this was my chance. How did I know who Jesus was and that he was in Jericho? Word travels fast on the street among people in need. If there is a way to get help, we know, and if the help is coming close, we know. We didn't have social media, but we didn't need it. Nor do people in need in your time. Word travels fast on the street.

I had heard a lot about Jesus, about his teaching and miracles — so many stories of healing, even of the blind. So, I shouted, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Apparently, this is the only time in which this title, Son of David, is used of Jesus in Mark, but this did not impress the crowd of people following Jesus. They sternly ordered me to be quiet. Pushy Bartimaeus was at it again. “Mind your manners, beggar!” they said with disgust, and as a kind of apology to Jesus.

But I was not going to be deterred so easily. I cried out even louder, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” But then, everything became eerily quiet. Perhaps I had gone too far. They might be preparing to remove me physically. It wouldn't be the first time.

But at this point, Jesus stopped and said, “Call him here.” They called me, saying in utter astonishment, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” I could hear the derision in their voices. But I threw off my cloak, which was the only thing I owned - it was my bed on warm nights and my blanket on cold ones - and I moved toward Jesus more quickly than I had moved in years.

“What do you want me to do for you?” he asked. “*Rabbouni* (my teacher), let me see again,” I said. Jesus said to me — I can almost hear his voice now — “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately I could see again. And I followed him from that point forward. What else could I do? Some people probably thought I would find a job, start a family, pursue all the unfulfilled dreams I had, but none of that mattered now. He had transformed my life! I was following him!

But what might my story have to say to you? Perhaps you might reconsider how you view people in need, those who live on the margins of your society, those who beg and badger at times. You may blame them for their situation. And to be sure, we all bear some responsibility for how we

play the cards we are dealt in life, though we have no say in what cards we are dealt. But none of us knows the whole story on any other person. Only God is worthy to judge. Perhaps you could reserve judgment, try to understand where suffering people are coming from, even put up with some badgering. Until you have been there, you just don't know what it is like.

At the very least, you could set aside the labels. No one wants to be known by a single word, characteristic, decision or action. No one can be known fully or defined in this way, whether the labeling is intended as criticism or affirmation. We are all more than one phrase or attribute. My name is Bartimaeus, which means Son of Timaeus in Aramaic. I was blind for a period of my life, but not my entire life, and even if I had been, I would have been more than the blindness.

It's not really a difficult concept to grasp. We have all been labeled at some point in ways we despised. We know what it feels like. We know there are people who think they elevate their own status by putting down others in this way. They don't, and we don't want to be one of those people. Do we?

You might also consider what my healing and transformation might say about your experience with Jesus. It wasn't just my eyesight that was healed. It was all of me. Physical blindness had limited my experience in so many ways. I now had options, the freedom to choose, and what I chose was to leave everything I had — which wasn't much — to follow Jesus. Unlike a wealthy man who knew his commandments but wasn't willing to give up his wealth to follow Jesus, I had little to lose, and much to gain, but then, didn't he... have much to gain?

What has Jesus meant to you? What kind of healing have you experienced? If you don't feel a complete sense of utter transformation, perhaps he still has work to do in your life. If you do, what have you been willing to set aside in order to follow him? I have made some difficult decisions in my life. This wasn't one of them. Once I was healed and transformed, my path was clear, my heart's desire was clear. It was with him, wherever he wanted me to be. How about you?

But there is one more thing you might consider in my story. Sometimes it's okay to be loud. Sometimes you have to be bold. Sometimes you have to

Speak up for yourself or what you believe is right and just, even if people look at you like they wish you would just go away. People do that sometimes, especially crowds of people. People are wrong sometimes. You don't need to be arrogant but nor do you need to be so concerned that someone disagrees with you that you lose your courage and faith.

Yes, I said faith, that's what Jesus said I had, and he said it made me well. Faith is boldness. If I hadn't had that, if I had been intimidated by the crowd, I would still be begging on the side of the road.

What part of your life is still waiting on a little more boldness and conviction? It's not all up to us. God in Christ strengthens, us, redeems us, empowers us. We do not control our lives, but there are things we have a say in, things that require our voice.

But it's not just about us either. Who else in this world is waiting on a little more boldness from us? The deaf and the blind, the poor and the lame, the addicted and abused, the immigrant and refugee, people of minority faiths and identities, all who live on the margins of your world? Sometimes we have to speak up for ourselves, and sometimes we have to speak up for others. Either way, boldness, faith is involved.

I suppose I am being a little pushy today, a little bold. But I figured this might be my only chance to speak to you. Practice what you preach! Right? What should you call me? Bartimaeus, just Bartimaeus. Isn't your name good enough? If this is the only thing you learn from me — that it is best to call people by their name and think of each person as a unique beloved child of God — my visit will have been worth it.

(exit singing with guitar to O Waly Waly). Lord, I was less than I could be, I longed for more, to be set free, and then you came and gifted me with visions of eternity.