

“Good Help Is Hard To Find”
Mark 10:46–52
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First Baptist Church, Raleigh
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“Good help is hard to find,” or so it said, often by me, but usually tongue-in-cheek. There are people who say this in a straightforward way, but I’m usually poking fun at someone lightheartedly, and I usually get an appropriate response. But Jesus could utter this phrase seriously.

Three times he predicts his suffering and death, and three times his disciples, his hand-picked helpers, immediately start grappling for status and power. They seem to be utterly clueless! Earlier in Mark 10, they try to turn away people who are bringing children to Jesus whereupon he rebukes them, welcomes the children into his arms and blesses them, saying that to such as these belongs the realm of God.

In today’s reading, many in the crowd of people following Jesus try to hush a blind man named Bartimaeus who is asking for help. The text says they sternly order him to be quiet. They seem like liturgical bodyguards trying to build a wall around Jesus to protect him or at least his time, but Jesus has come to bring healing and hope to the very people from whom they are trying to protect him. Good help is hard to find!

It’s not clear why they want to turn away Bartimaeus. He is blind and thus falls into a category of rejected people. Infirmities are viewed to be judgment for sin. But Jesus rejects this thinking and has given sight to other blind people. Perhaps others in the crowd want Jesus to address their needs first, or perhaps the problem with Bartimaeus is that he is so loud and demanding. He won’t shut up even when they demand that he do so! He just keeps repeating his request, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” or “Extend mercy to me! Help me!”

The thing is — we know this guy. Loud, obnoxious, demanding, won’t take “no” for an answer — we know him at the church office, he’s always buzzing at the door; we know him walking downtown, he won’t leave us alone; we know him in our places of work and study. There are needy people everywhere, and some of them just won’t go away.

But no matter why many in the crowd try to silence Bartimaeus, whether it is because he is an outcast, they need help too, or they find him obnoxious, Jesus says, “Call him here.” So, they call him, saying, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” Or perhaps (with sarcasm dripping), “Take heart; get up, he is calling you, God knows why!” He springs up like a young child and goes to Jesus who then asks the same question he asks James and John earlier in this chapter, “What do you want me to do for you?” While the sons of Zebedee want places of importance, Bartimaeus says he just wants to see again, so Jesus heals him immediately, saying, “Go; your faith has made you well.”

It is part of a larger pattern of behavior we see throughout the Gospels. Much to the consternation of the protectors of piety who see the world as divided between clean and unclean, insiders and outsiders, worthy and unworthy, Jesus welcomes everyone, especially those others exclude. Jesus says he comes for the sick and wounded, the downtrodden and brokenhearted. He comes to bring hope for those who have been suffering a long time, especially those who have been left out.

It startles the religious establishment, and yet this is not entirely new. There are precedents within the Hebrew canon for this kind of inclusive healing and hope, like our reading today from Jeremiah.

It is an unusually upbeat passage for this doom-and-gloom prophet. It is part of what scholars call the Book of Consolation within Jeremiah, a passage of hope for a future beyond the time of exile. The prophet speaks of a day when God will personally lead the people back to their homeland. So, there is hope for those who have suffered for a long time. But Jeremiah also emphasizes the all-inclusive nature of this journey home. God will gather people from the farthest parts of the earth, “among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here (Jeremiah 31:8).”

The weak and vulnerable, the marginalized and outcast, even the loud and demanding, all are included in God’s redemptive love. It’s just how God works, through the nation of Israel and in the ministry of Jesus.

So, what is the message for us? To be honest, it is one that creates some awkward tension, at least it does for me. It is a message about

welcoming everyone, responding to human need like Jesus does, which we long to do, but there are times when we function more like the disciples and people in the crowd who want to establish some boundaries for Jesus' ministry. There are times when we just cannot respond to every demand at the door. There are moments in each of our lives when we say "no" to expressed need. Perhaps Jesus still feels like good help is hard to find.

But to be fair, setting limits is a practical necessity. I did help my mother structure part of a logic course on rationalization because I was and am so good at it... but I don't think this is simply rationalization or what Garison Keiller has called B.S.ification. Jesus himself cannot meet every need around him. Being human in every way like us, he has limits, he has to find time to rest and deepen his connection to God, and there are times when he feels pushed and pulled in every direction.

There is a scene in the musical "Jesus Christ Superstar" where Jesus is utterly worn out and frazzled, as he sings, "There's too many of you, don't push me; there's too little of me." When the musical first came out, some pious folks thought it was blasphemous to depict Jesus in this way, but the musical was leaning into the human side of Jesus, and he does grow weary in scripture. He has limits. So, how could we not need some limits on what we do as individuals and as a church? Perhaps thinking we can meet every need is blasphemous!

But in addition to the practical need for limits, there are also competing concerns with responding to every need in our building. While we would like to have an open-door policy, we have two preschools that meet here in addition to lots of other groups coming for specific ministries. So, we monitor who comes in. The church should be a place of welcome and refuge for all in need, but it is not a place of refuge if it creates space for harm to be done to the vulnerable.

At our house, we have bird feeders that also attract squirrels and chipmunks, and I have begun to feed the rabbits. This is kind for all the animals, unless it also attracts snakes who eat all the above. It's a rough metaphor, but we don't want to invite people into space that is not safe. We want to keep the snakes out, though I used to have pet snakes... So, we take measures to create safe space, but balancing hospitality with

security is a tricky task. We have a work group addressing this very issue right now. They need our prayers because both sides of this tension — hospitality and security — are central to our mission.

So, there are practical limits to what we can do for others, in addition to competing concerns with the use of our building, and then there is the matter of who gets to define what an emergency is. I remember a call I received at home on a Saturday morning at 7:00 when we were in Danville, Virginia in 1988. It was the leader of our Senior Adult Group there, the Double Ms, which stood for Moffett Mature. It was the Moffett Memorial Baptist Church. Lavicie was her name, and she wanted to know if I thought she should cancel the Double M's lunch meeting on Tuesday because it had snowed the previous day and night.

I was in my late twenties, it was Saturday morning at 7:00, I was sound asleep when she called. Trying to speak in a kind tone because I knew she was just anxious for her group and wanted to do the right thing, I said, "Lavicie, it's Saturday morning. Tuesday at noon is a long way off. I don't think we need to make a decision right now. It may be 70 degrees by then." She agreed. She just needed some reassurance, and at noon on Tuesday, it was 74. The snow had long-since melted.

Was this an emergency? Did we have to make a decision Saturday morning? Who gets to decide such things? For most people in profound need, it is always an emergency. Bartimaeus has been blind for a long time, but Jesus' presence presents an opportunity that may not last long. Is this an emergency? It is a question that is often in play, and one that affects ministry decisions in a world with limited resources.

So, as you can see, I am gifted at explanation or rationalization, but all this having been said, much of it legitimate, we are left with Jesus' example of responding to human need. If we are going to be any help to him, if we are going to continue his ministry, we have to find ways to be more open and stop hindering some who need help. There are many different types of need — financial, physical, emotional, spiritual. What barriers do we put up and what doors might we open?

We are doing a lot of things to address physical and financial needs right here and through agencies we partner with in the community. You

know the list — our clothing ministry, Toy Joy, the food truck, Urban Ministries, Oak City Cares, Habitat for Humanity, and the list goes on and on. But there is always more to do. Just this week we have been asked to consider being a White Flag Shelter and thus house homeless people on nights when it is under 35 degrees. There are practical issues to consider, but hopefully we can find a way to help. There is also a need for a network of communication to help people find out what help is available and where. This is one of the greatest barriers to assistance there is in Raleigh, but there are precedents in other cities for how to do this. And affordable housing remains a massive challenge here.

To address emotional needs, mental health needs, professional leadership is required in terms of counseling, training volunteers, and organizing other interventions. The church is not a mental health clinic, but we could locate some counseling in our building, we are working on this, and there are situations where training can help us respond better to some people in need.

We are also surrounded by spiritual need in this time of rapid change, deep division, increasing secularization, and the decline of institutional religion. People have deep spiritual needs, and the church exists to address them, but this is an area where we may be putting up the most barriers. This will have to be the subject of another sermon, but the key lies in things like allowing honest questions, being willing to engage critical issues, being more sensitive to insider language, and being more open about our faith. Interest in institutional religion may be declining, but spiritual hunger is not. We need to continue to search for ways to connect the essence of spirituality grounded in the Jesus story with people searching for meaning and community.

Whatever we do to enhance our ministry, we must not give in to a fortress mentality. The church, whether the building or the people, does not need a giant wall and deep moat around it. Jesus says the gates of hell shall not prevail against his church (Matthew 16:18), and gates are a defensive tool, but hell is on the defensive in this image, not the church. We go into the world with a message of love and healing, embracing every Bartimaeus in need. That's the help Jesus seeks to this day.