

What Do You See?

Mark 10:46-52

The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

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Pastor Dave Carver

Did you watch the winter Olympics? What is your favorite event...no, wait, let me ask that a different way. If you could gain access to a particular event at the Olympics – if I had been able to get you some tickets, which event would you have chosen? Ice Dancing? Half-Pipe? Ski Jumping? There's a lot of excitement in those venues. I can understand why you would want to go and see them. But there were a number of people that I just could not figure out when those events aired last month. Many of the outdoor events that covered some distance – like some of the long skiing races, or maybe the biathlon – showed competitors covering several kilometers of frozen terrain – and at many of these places, there were fans lining the course. I can understand sitting in the stands and cheering for the speed skaters when you get to watch the whole race...but standing on the middle of a ten kilometer course watching a bunch of people come towards you and then pass you by – without ever knowing who started strong and who will eventually win – well, that's just foreign to me. I don't get it. It's like the people who stand at the middle of the marathon course... "Yay! You're out in front...for now...I hope that you do ok in the next thirteen miles...Good luck! Here's some water..."

Jesus and the disciples are in a long-distance event. They are on their way from Galilee, where for much of the past three years, Jesus has had a ministry of healing, teaching, and preaching. Not long ago, he told his disciples that the time had come for him to go to Jerusalem, where he would be tortured and killed, and then rise again. And as we have seen in recent weeks, he is getting closer to Jerusalem, and closer to his own death and resurrection. This morning, we find him in Jericho, which is about fifteen miles from Jerusalem.

Jerusalem, as you probably know, is the home of the Temple, the site for Jewish worship. At this time, there were more than 20,000 priests and 20,000 Levites who had some responsibility for the operation of the Temple and its environs. Many of those people and their families lived in or near Jericho – the "suburbs", if you will. Maybe the taxes were lower, or the schools were better, I don't know. At any rate, as this was the season of the Passover, many, if not most of them, would be expected to be on duty. Jewish law at that time said that anyone who lived within fifteen miles of Jerusalem was required to go to the city to celebrate the Passover. Clearly, not everyone did – but I'm telling you this so that you get a sense of the scene about which Lindsay just read to you.

Jericho is a madhouse of activity. Just as crazy sports fans line the course at the Cross-Country skiing venue, so too, the residents of Jericho would have come out and watched the streams of pilgrims passing through town on their way to Jerusalem. There is an air of anticipation and excitement. Strangers are in town. People are alert.

Jesus and his followers come through town, and presumably he is teaching as they walk. A crowd gathers, and then we meet a very unlikely man. Mark tells us that Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was there. So?

We've been studying Mark since Labor Day, 2009. I want you to think back. Jesus meets, and Jesus heals, a lot of people. There's the man who is let through the ceiling in chapter 2. The demon-possessed man and the woman who has been bleeding for twelve years in chapter 5. The woman from Syrophenecia in chapter 7, the blind man in chapter 8, the boy who had seizures in chapter 9. None of these people are named. We don't know much about them, or their parents, or anything else. But here, in chapter 10, we get the man's name, and his father's name. Why is that important? There must be something different about this case. What do you see as this scene unfolds?

Bartimaeus is an outsider in many ways. Since he was blind, and therefore disabled, he was not fit to serve as a priest – obviously, he had trouble finding any kind of employment. He's not from Galilee, like Jesus' disciples. And he's not from Jerusalem, like the religious bigwigs.

Not only is he a stranger, but he is embarrassing. He hears the commotion about Jesus and he starts to cry out, "Son of David, have mercy!" The term "Son of David" was a common term that was used at that time to refer to the Messiah – to the one that God would send to free his people. This is the first time that term appears in the Gospel of Mark...the Messiah is in fact on his way to Jerusalem, and who is the first to recognize him? A blind beggar. Hmmmm.

At any rate, his crying out is clearly a problem for the crowds. Since the term "Son of David" was used to refer to the Messiah, and since most people thought the Messiah would be a military figure who would fight the Romans to free God's people, maybe the crowd was trying to hush up Bartimaeus because they didn't want to get the Romans on edge. After all, a major religious festival is getting underway. A lot of pilgrims are coming through town. If the police get all worked up and start to rough a few people up, that'll be bad for business. Bartimaeus, shut up, will you? People are staring. You're making them nervous.

Perhaps another reason that Bartimaeus' cries are so disturbing is because, well, disabled people make many of us feel nervous. We don't know how to act, or where to look (or not look) when we see someone with an obvious physical or mental condition. Sometimes, these people offend us – we wish that they weren't there...it would make it so much easier for us to concentrate on, well, US if we didn't have to look at THEM.

But for all the ways that he is kicked to the curb by the onlookers, Bartimaeus doesn't seem to care. He is bold and eager in his approach to Jesus. He throws off his cloak when he goes to speak with the Lord – he doesn't want anything to slow him down. When you think about it, that's a risky move. If he's already on people's nerves, and then he goes throwing his stuff around, well, if Jesus doesn't heal him, how is he supposed to find it again? But he lets go of it

because he senses that Jesus can do amazing things.

When he speaks with Jesus, Jesus asks him the exact same question that Jesus asks James and John in verse 36: “What do you want me to do for you?” How fascinating that Jesus does not presume to know what the man wants!

And Bartimaeus responds with a specific request. “I would like to have my sight restored.” He shares his deepest desire with Jesus in the expectation that Jesus can do something about it.

Friends, that’s a lesson for many of us. While we may not be physically blind, each of us is weighed down by some condition – each of us has something that is holding us back from God’s best in our lives. And too often, we have a secret love of that thing. We say that we’re tired all the time, but we stay up on the internet until all hours every night. We say that our spouses don’t understand who we are, but we won’t be honest with them about the things that we’re thinking about. We know that we’re out of shape, but we keep going back for the second donut. Do you know what I mean? Too often, we love the thing that is holding us back from where God has intended us to be.

Bartimaeus doesn’t do that. He throws his cloak away. He speaks his need to Jesus. He expects Jesus to do something about it. And note, too, when he speaks to Jesus face to face, he doesn’t use his title, “Son of David”. He calls him “Master.” In Hebrew, that’s “rabbouni”. A rabbi is a teacher or a scholar. Rabbouni is *my* teacher, *my* master. You might refer to any number of people as rabbis, but you would have only one rabbouni. Bartimaeus, the noisy, embarrassing, outsider, has claimed that Jesus, the Messiah, is *his* rabbouni.

And that fact is not lost on Jesus, who restores Bartimaeus’ sight. And look at how the story ends: this obnoxious little man who makes us so nervous, this noisy beggar who fifteen minutes ago couldn’t see anything at all now sees that the best and only course of action that is open to him is to follow Jesus. “He received his sight and followed him on the way.” We’ve talked about how the men who have been with Jesus for three years have a hard time seeing what Jesus is really up to. The religious leaders can’t figure it out. But this blind outsider who irritated and frightened us a few moments ago now recognizes not only who Jesus is, but knows the correct response. He follows.

I need to tell you that from a literary standpoint, this is a significant turning point in the Gospel of Mark. It is the last time in Mark where Jesus heals someone – and healings have been quite important in Jesus’ ministry so far. More than that, however, it’s only the second time in Mark’s gospel that a blind person is healed. The first time Jesus healed a blind man, back in chapter eight, it led us right into Peter’s recognition of the fact that Jesus was the Messiah, and that in turn led us into Jesus’ predictions of his own suffering and death. In Mark 8, Jesus confronts a man who is blind, restores his sight, and then the people around Jesus all see new and amazing things about who Jesus is.

If I'm reading Mark, and I remember that healing blind people is followed by something big, then I want to know, "What's next?" Well, I don't want to give away everything about Mark 11, but I will point out to you that next week is Palm Sunday. Kind of a big day for Jesus and his followers...and for all of us who wonder who Jesus is...

As we sit with this little story about Bartimaeus this week, I recognize that there are some in this room who know what it feels like to be Bartimaeus. We know what it means to be an outsider, to be shushed, thrown under the bus, or just dumped on by people who seem to have it all together. The good news for those of us in that situation is that Jesus hears us, Jesus sees us, and Jesus knows our names. Jesus is waiting to make us whole – Jesus longs for us to be the people God created us to be.

But a lot of us are here this morning as insiders. We "get" church. We know the songs and appreciate when to stand up or sit down. If you're an insider, then let me encourage you to pay special attention to verse 49 this morning. So many times in Mark, the Gospel is hard on the disciples. It points out where they didn't do it right. But here is a lovely little sentence about one time when they got it right. After Jesus tells the people to quit trying to hush up Bartimaeus and calls him to come forward, Mark tells us that those nearby "called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; rise, he is calling you.'" Did you see that? They didn't get between Bartimaeus and Jesus! They encouraged Bartimaeus to go to Jesus!

Church, this is a word for you. Jesus has come into our world looking for people who need to be healed. Just as Bartimaeus had lost his sight and wanted to have it restored, we are surrounded by people who have lost something precious in their lives and long for the healing that can come from Jesus. Are we standing between them and Jesus? Or are we encouraging them to take their deepest desires to the only one who can straighten them out?

Every one sitting in the room this morning knows someone who has an ache in their heart...every one of us knows someone who has been beaten up, shushed, disrespected, or disenfranchised by the world around them. Some of our friends, like Bartimaeus, are willing to keep on yelling until they get within earshot of Jesus. Others have given up, or gotten so accustomed to their misery that they can't see any reason to cry out any more. What are we doing to help these folks, with whom God is simply crazy love, to stand a little closer to our rabbouni's intentions for their lives?

On February 20, Marcus Hellner from Sweden won the gold medal for the Men's 30 kilometer Cross-Country Ski Pursuit. That's more than eighteen miles of skiing. I still can't say that I would have the slightest interest in standing at the nine-mile point of that course and waving my flag for him, or for Tobias Angerer or Johan Olsson, each of whom ended up finishing less than three seconds after Hellner. But I do want to be someone who encourages the people I see racing around me every day to step a little closer to the God who loves them, who calls to them, who knows their names, and who desires to see them made whole.

I hope to see you out on the middle of the course this week. God bless you, church. Keep cheering. Amen.