

The Gospel set for today is a great story with many layers of meaning. It makes for a nice contrast with the story we had a couple of weeks ago of the rich young man who comes to Jesus and asks that question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" I don't know if you remember that. That man was unnamed, but the man in today's story is not. He's called Bartimaeus. The man in that first story was very rich. Bartimaeus most definitely wasn't. And the rich young man walks away from Jesus at the end of their encounter. But our story today ends up with Bartimaeus following Jesus. So, it's a very different kind of story and I want to take a few moments to look at three different actors in this story. Well, the first actor isn't a singular actor. It's a group. It's the crowd, who can often act as a single entity, but it's the crowd and the disciples around Jesus that I want to think about first.

The story begins with Jesus in a large crowd leaving Jericho. Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, is sitting by the roadside when he hears that Jesus is walking past. He cries out, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me." Then it says, "Many sternly ordered him to be quiet." He was shushed. One interesting thing about this story is that Bartimaeus is blind yet it's he who sees Jesus for who he is, and the crowd who have sight don't see Jesus for who he really is and hardly see Bartimaeus at all. They certainly don't see him as Jesus sees him. The crowd and the disciples and the people around Jesus don't see Bartimaeus as someone worthy of their attention. Bartimaeus was almost invisible to the crowd. He was expendable. His suffering wasn't important enough to warrant any tenderness, patience, or even curiosity. The crowd didn't see Bartimaeus as a neighbor and all crowds and communities can have that same blind spot. There's always a temptation to keep things insular, safe, comfortable, and familiar.

If you've received a letter about our Stewardship Campaign that kicked off last week, and I hope you have and you recognize the logo, or if you've seen the video, which is on the website, you'll know that our goal this year in the Stewardship Campaign is love, love of God, love for each other, and love of

our neighbor. We want to ensure that as a community here at St. James we follow Jesus' command to recognize those who are different to ourselves as our neighbor. In the kingdom of God, there are no insiders or outsiders, only neighbors. We want to ensure that we are not blind in the same way that the crowd in this story is blind and unable to see beyond the extent of the crowd. We want to be able to see beyond our church community. We want to see the people who need our help. We want to continue to develop our love for our neighbors.

The second actor in the story is Jesus, and the first thing we're told about Jesus in the story is that he stood still. He's heading out of town. He's going on the road away from Jericho. But when he hears Bartimaeus shout out, he stops and stands still. The disciples around Jesus are busy hustling everyone along. They haven't got time to deal with an inconvenient, blind beggar. But Jesus does. We can all feel that we're terribly busy and important. I was talking to a dental receptionist this week, someone who works in a dental office, and she told me that she had a customer who was always late, always came in saying, "I'm terribly late, but I'm just so busy." So, she rang him up the day before his next appointment and confirmed the time. He said, "I'm very busy out tomorrow. I might be 15 minutes late. Is that okay?" She said, "Oh, that's fine. Just we won't be able to give you an anesthetic." He arrived on time for his appointment.

Jesus never in the Gospel appears too busy for people. He always has time for those in need. We should remember that when we pray Jesus is always ready to listen to his people in need when they call out to him. In the Book of Hebrews, Jesus is called as one who is sympathetic to our weaknesses because he has known our condition. We pray to one who has stopped and stood still when he heard the cry of Bartimaeus. Jesus heard Bartimaeus and called him over. So Bartimaeus jumps up and stands before Jesus, and there's this beautiful moment here not without a certain irony that blind Bartimaeus stands before Jesus and sees

him for who he truly is, the Messiah. Bartimaeus sees Jesus as holy and purely as Bartimaeus is seen by Jesus. The gaze and recognition in this story are mutual.

Then Jesus asks Bartimaeus this most penetrating question, "What do you want me to do for you?" And this is a question that we would all do well to consider. How would we reply if Jesus was standing before us and asked, "What would you like me to do for you?" Bartimaeus answered, "Let me see again." It seems obvious, but there are other things he could have said. He could have said, "Well, I'd like a better place to beg," or "I'd like people to be more generous to me." But instead, he was able to share his heart's desire. "I want to see again," he said. Jesus understands our complexity, the fact that we have many competing desires, many longings, many needs, and he invites us like he invited Bartimaeus to honest self-reflection, which is absolutely essential to our growth and healing.

We can all benefit from a moment of self-examination, to find out what's truly in our heart. What do we long for? What's our deepest desire? And I've sometimes considered that question and always found it helpful. I've always found that to answer it properly requires a radical honesty, a radical vulnerability, and a radical trust.

And so let's turn to the final actor in the story, Bartimaeus. I want to say something about how he responds to Jesus. I've been talking in previous weeks about our lives of faith don't begin with our own efforts and our insights, but rather with God's grace. Our life of faith begins as we respond to the grace that God has shown us in Jesus. Bartimaeus' response to Jesus is wholehearted and enthusiastic. He first appears in the story sitting by the road and he ends the story walking on the road, walking on the road with Jesus on the way out of Jericho. He shows us three stages in becoming a disciple of Jesus. He begins by acknowledging his need, he's grateful for his healing, and he shows his loyalty by following Jesus.

And there's an interesting detail in the story that's worth mentioning, I think. It says that "He threw off his coat and came to Jesus." Bartimaeus is a beggar. A cloak, the coat that he wraps himself in, is both a beggar's covering and his livelihood. It's what he'd have kept himself warm in every night and it's what he would've spread out in front of him in the day to collect coins from passersby. The detail of what Bartimaeus does with his cloak is significant. It shows how completely and wholeheartedly he embraced Jesus and came to trust him. He trusted Jesus enough to cast off all that he had, all that was most familiar to him, all that kept him safe. He gave that all up to follow Jesus on a way of uncertainty. Bartimaeus gave up the little he had to follow Jesus.

I was talking last week about hilarious giving. This seems to me a great example of that. Bartimaeus gave up everything hilariously. When Bartimaeus committed himself to Jesus and joined him on the way, he was living hilariously. He wasn't plodding on the way with Jesus. He was skipping and jumping on the road out of Jericho. His life was filled with joy. How different to the end of the story that I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon of the nameless rich man who came to Jesus. He ended up skulking away. He left Jesus with his coffers full, but his soul empty. Bartimaeus gave up all he had, his cloak, but his soul was overflowing with joy. Bartimaeus had found a gift that is beyond price. He'd found love, joy, peace, mercy, and grace. May we find such things as Bartimaeus did and learn to live hilariously. Amen.