

Mercy

October 27, 2024

Hebrews 7:23-28

Mark 10:46-52

The healing of Bartimaeus has some distinct differences from other healing stories in the Gospel of Mark. Just to start, Mark knew – and so we know – Bartimaeus' name. Most of the time in this book we never hear the names of those healed. We don't know the name of the first person Jesus healed in the synagogue in Capernaum, nor the name of the man whose friends lowered him through a hole in the roof of a house. We don't know the name of the man whose demons Jesus banished into a herd of pigs.

Until... Bartimaeus.

Bartimaeus took more initiative than most of the others. People tended to bring their family members and neighbors to Jesus for healing. Bartimaeus, however, shouted from his place at the side of the road. Those around him – presumably his friends and neighbors – tried to silence him rather than assist him to Jesus.

This is also the first time that someone has sought healing using a Messianic title. "Son of David" meant someone who was part of the ancient royal line descended from King David. To call someone "Son of David," declared them to be the legitimate ruler of the nation. It was a cry of rebellion against the Herodian kings and the Roman Empire.

Which is probably why they tried to silence him. "Son of David" was dangerous talk.

As Matt Skinner writes at Working Preacher, "For Bartimaeus, the title obviously indicates that Jesus is God's designated agent, and it introduces the notion of Jesus as a royal figure, an image that becomes very important when Jesus enters Jerusalem (11:1-10), goes on trial (15:1-15), and dies (15:16-32) as a king. Bartimaeus, despite his blindness and all its connotations of spiritual ignorance (compare 4:12; 8:18), sees the royal dimensions of Jesus' identity. As the story progresses, we discover that Bartimaeus also discerns that Jesus is specially able to show mercy and heal."

Not only does this story offer plenty of contrasts with Jesus' other healings, it offers a lot of contrasts with other events in this chapter, chapter ten of Mark's Gospel. That question Jesus asked Bartimaeus? "What do you want me to do for you?" It's the same question Jesus asked James and John in verse thirty-six. James and John, remember, asked for positions of power and privilege. Bartimaeus asked to see again.

Go back a little further in chapter ten and you'll find that conversation between Jesus and a wealthy man. Jesus asked him to sell what he had and follow him. The man went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Bartimaeus had one possession: a cloak. As Luis Menendez-Antuna writes at Working Preacher, "The cloak here is not only an aesthetic garment. For individuals living below poverty levels, the cloak is a piece that provides warmth in hostile weather conditions, a valuable piece that would allow them to sleep at night or to throw it in front of them to collect money. The garment is also a sign of status and power... the garment represents the little power he owns."

Did you catch it? When Bartimaeus made his way to Jesus, he cast the cloak aside. As the story ended, Bartimaeus did what the rich man had not done: he left behind his possessions and followed Jesus.

And as D. Mark David observes at LeftBehindAndLovingit, "The last time someone shouted outside of Jericho, the walls fell down."

There was something else Bartimaeus shouted. It wasn't just the title "Son of David." He called for mercy. In Greek, it's only two words: "Eleison me." "Mercy me."

If that word "eleison" sounds familiar at all, it's one of the most ancient Christian prayers. In Greek it goes, "Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison" – "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy."

Have mercy.

Mercy.

The curious thing that stood out to me in this passage, among all the other curious things, is that this is the last story Mark told about Jesus' ministry before his entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The colt, the cloaks, the leafy branches, and the shouts of Hosanna – they're the next thing in the book. So Mark used this story to close his account of Jesus' words and actions prior to the climactic events of Jerusalem. The thing I noticed is that Mark also opened his account of Jesus' ministry by describing a healing, the casting out of an unclean spirit in chapter one.

In Mark, the first thing and the last thing Jesus did was heal. Acts of power and compassion. Deeds of mercy.

Mercy.

Eleison.

There are a lot of ways to understand God. God is the great Creator, the Power that grants existence not just to the world but to the universe. God is the figure of Wisdom and insight who promises success and prosperity to those who follow. God is the freedom-granter, the Law-giver, and the community organizer who doesn't just rescue people from slavery but gives them the structures which will permit them to live well. God is also the Judge, frequently the irritated judge, who responds to human rebellion and sin with warning, decision, and consequences.

God is all of those things. Emphasize one too much and you will have a distorted theology, and heaven knows we've seen that often enough. Jesus, however, demonstrated a fundamental quality of God in the way that he lived his life and exercised his ministry. Mark picked up on it and made sure we'd see it.

Mercy. God as revealed in Jesus Christ is merciful.

Think for a moment about the saints we honor today, the people whose loss we mourn but whose lives we celebrate. Why? Were they movers and shakers, wealthy and powerful? Did they speak and the world listened? By and large, no.

But I'm pretty sure that along the way, they gave us mercy.

They dried our tears when we wept. They sat by us in the storm. They showed us the way when we were lost. They fed us good things when we were hungry. They pitched in when we needed help. They gave us words of wisdom when we were confused. They visited us when we were sick. They did things for us and for other people because they cared.

Very few of them would have been called "great" by the world. You've heard people scorn the merciful as weak and inconsequential. You've heard them praise strength and power and ruthlessness.

The world doesn't know what greatness is.

Think about these people you honor today. They had successes. They had achievements. They had triumphs. We honor them for it. But are those the things that won your heart? Are those the things you miss?

Isn't it the deeds of love and mercy that made them great to you?

It's the deeds of love and mercy that made them like Jesus.

As you come forward to light candles in their memory today, let your memories of their compassion be strong and bright. And as you return from lighting that candle, let your commitment to their compassion be stronger and brighter yet. Let their deeds of love and mercy inspire you to your deeds of love and mercy. From the first to the last, let the healing of the earth be your goal and your desire.

Be like Jesus.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson