

Immediately, Bartimaeus regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way. We all know about following. It has advantages and disadvantages. If you follow your siblings in school, the teachers have certain expectations of you. We follow our favorite team in sports. Someone starts a trend, and a lot of society will follow. We follow those who have gone before us in a job, a position, a task. Who we follow is usually important. It says a lot about who we are and what we stand for.

Our text in Mark today offers us great contrast. On the one hand, we have a great multitude. On the other hand, we have one lowly individual. He is low on the social scale – he is a blind beggar. Jesus is “On the way.” It is Mark’s account of the journey to Jerusalem and the cross. Jesus is leaving Jericho which is located only 15 miles from Jerusalem. This account began when Jesus asked the disciples about his identity. “Who do people say that I am?” They answered, “John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets.” It is really an elite group. Jesus doesn’t seem to care much for the opinion polls, “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the messiah.” Messiah, a political term meaning the one who would come and restore Israel to the former glory of the time of King David. Jesus begins to teach Peter and the disciples that he is going to Jerusalem and there he will suffer and die and be resurrected. He talks plainly about following after him is for those who would take up the cross. It is not a message that the disciples want to hear.

Today, we are “On the way,” fifteen miles from Jerusalem. Leaving Jericho, they are surrounded by a large crowd. There is this blind beggar seated by the roadside. Hearing that Jesus is passing by, Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, begins to shout out for help. “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” Mark for the first time in his gospel, has Bartimaeus us a title that puts Jesus in the line of David. The crowd tries to quiet Bartimaeus. But he will have none of it, he just cries out more loudly. We live in a world of schedules. We are busy people. We are accustomed to people saying, “I would like to do that, but I don’t have time in my schedule.” Frequently, speakers are introduced with the phrase, “Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule.” We are accustomed to our questions being answered by opinion polls. Many times the individual just gets lost.

“Have Mercy on me.” Who are they today? They are among us. They are our young people, and not all of them are in excellent school systems. Many of them are in the Birmingham City or Jefferson County School systems.

They too are saying – “Help me.” “Have mercy on me?” Who are they?

They are the Hispanics who don’t know our language or customs and are desperately trying to find a better life. “Have mercy on me.” Who are they? They are the sales clerks, those who clean our buildings and streets.

They are all those who work at a minimum wage that has not been raised in nine years. “Have mercy on me.” Who are they? They are the gay and lesbians among us who struggle to have the same rights afforded to other couples. “Have mercy on us.” Who are they? They are those elderly living on fixed incomes and the 43 million of those in our society who cannot afford health insurance. They are our homeless, the poor among us.

And they still cry our “Have mercy on me!”

The milling crowd is disturbed by the agitated cries of this blind man.

They try to quiet him. The crowd wants him to keep still, to be quiet.

Their attitude is callous. Too many times the church has sided with the crowd. But in our text today, “On the way,” Jesus stops. There is hope.

The beggar throws off his coat. He doesn’t fold it and ask someone to hold it. He throws it off and springs up to get to Jesus. There is hope.

PILGRIM C H U R C H

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The attention is focused on the blind beggar. This unimportant person, seated by the roadside, has thrust himself onto center stage. And Jesus has stopped to listen to him. "Call Him." How does the church respond to those in poverty, those without health care, without a decent wage, those discriminated against because of color or sexual identity? Maybe we should just follow the lead of Jesus. Amid the crowd, "On the way," Jesus stops.

By stopping Jesus is saying, "You count." Deep within us all of us is the longing to know that we count for something. It is true of all those saying to us today, "Have mercy on me." The Amish community has much to teach us about living together in community. On the way to the funeral of their children, they stopped by the home of the man who had killed their children to bring his wife and children with them. In their time of pain and sorrow, they reached out to another that they perceived to be in pain and sorrow.

I often wonder what would have happened after 9/11 if we had reached out to those pushed to the very fringe of existence in Middle East and invited them to sit with us and consider together the cause of the anger between us.

I believe that stopping is a part of any ministry. When we make a new budget, we are stopping to answer questions about who we are and what we are about. When we gather next weekend in our visioning process, we are stopping to look at ourselves. We will be taking time to consider who we are as the People of God. We will begin to celebrate those who have gone before us – those who we follow as we try to be the church in our own day.

We have a chance to define how we understand God speaking to us today and what we are going to do about that. I hope a lot of that stopping will help us center on who the people are around us who are saying "Have mercy on me."

The crowd changes its' attitude. Now they begin to say, "Take heart!" "You are in luck!" Not really. It is much deeper than that. It is not a "Cherrie O!"

"What do you want me to do for you?" Do you remember that question?

It is the same question that Jesus asked James and John. They responded by asking for positions of power when Jesus comes into his kingdom. Bartimaeus responds, "Teacher. Let me see again." It is the last recorded healing event in Mark. Jesus has set his face to Jerusalem and the cross. This healing is a work of love and mercy. Jesus stops and reaches out to this one on the fringe, this one, that to many would seem trivial. Bartimaeus is "only a drop in the bucket", but in the parable of the last judgement,

Jesus talks about giving the thirsty a cup of water.

"Take heart." He is calling you. Take heart, Pilgrim. God is calling you.

And through you Pilgrim, God will reach out to those in our midst today who are calling, "Have mercy on me."