

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter, April 15, 2012
Lessons: Isaiah 29:18-24 and Mark 10:46-52

THE LOADED QUESTION

What do you or I have in common with the blind beggar sitting by a road in Jericho as Jesus, passes by? You might say we have very little in common with him, except our shared humanity which in his case was largely denied by those considered superior in his society. His condition denied him access to most of the rights and privileges we enjoy, and his culture tended to blame him for his own misery by labeling his blindness a punishment from God for something he or his parents had done, even if no one had any idea what it was. So, while his fellow bystanders that day do show some sympathy for him, the superior people dismissed him as useless while the highly religious scorned him as sinful.

Thinking again, we might realize we have much in common with Bartimaeus. We have vision, but our sight is very limited. Obviously we do not see the future with any clarity or certainty. Last Sunday, we celebrated Jesus' resurrection, but only in faith and in hope do we look beyond death. Faith is called "the assurance of things not seen," and so we entrust our unseeable future to the God whose redemptive love raised Jesus to make him the firstborn of many sisters and brothers. God means to include us in Jesus' new and everlasting life, but on this side of death and resurrection there is much we do not see.

Bartimaeus is a nobody who does not even really have a name of his own in the story. Simon, Jesus' disciple he nicknamed Peter (the Rock), was Simon bar Jonah, meaning Simon son of Jonah. Bartimaeus simply means "son of Timaeus," without the personal name, but that's not why I say he is a nobody. When he calls out to Jesus, other people in the crowd scold him, telling him to be quiet and stop making a fuss. He is not important enough to draw attention to himself. As a nobody and a sinner, he should keep quiet and not intrude upon the business or comfort of people who matter.

We live in a more enlightened time and a more democratic society, but there are still many among us even here in this land who are effectively silenced. Their stories go untold, their cries unheeded. But even you and I, who have greater means than most on this earth, may find ourselves feeling quite unnoticed, unheard, and only superficially known and accepted. In many ways, we do not even understand ourselves or our own thoughts and feelings. Who has not felt discontented without knowing why? Who has not been angry or sad or anxious without what we call "any good reason"? How do we know what people

really think of us, and what would they think if they could see us behind our many masks of propriety, competence, and virtue? Paul says the day will come when the imperfect and partial will pass away, and then we will know as fully as we have been known (by God, that is). But for now we see only dimly, as one looking at life through a dark glass and puzzling over life's many riddles, the greatest of which is the riddle we are to ourselves.

Perhaps to everyone's surprise, Jesus asks for the shouting Bartimaeus to be called to him. So, it's time for him to stop crying out. Is it not typically human to persist in lamenting our lot in life, voicing our complaints, and crying for help when the opportunity has come. "Take heart; get up, he is calling you."

When I first started playing Little League baseball, I was put in center field, probably because I had a decent arm, but with kids that age a center fielder doesn't get a lot of business. So, there I stood waiting, often through the inning, with nothing to do but think, which proved not to be good for me. At first I thought, "Somebody, hit me a fly to catch or a line drive to field; hit me something." But after a while, I'd had too much time for thoughts like, "What if I can't get to it or what if I loose it in the sun and drop it and runs score?" I built my own pressure while nothing was happening, and then I wasn't quite so sure I really wanted anybody to hit one out to me. I was much happier when I got to pitch.

We are a visioning church trying to keep continually seeking the answers to three questions. Who are we (as a church)? Where are we (in time and place, in our situations and needs, within the context of our communities and the larger world)? And what is Jesus Christ calling us to be (as a church) and to do (to serve him by reaching out to people with his grace)? Those are the three questions that continue to urge us forward, opening us to change that will be growth rather than deterioration, but there is also a question from Jesus to us: "What do you want me to do for you?" Have we ever thought about the faith that way? What do we seek from Jesus Christ, a little comfort or a changed life? What do I want him to do? Get me into heaven when I die? Okay, but what about now? Do I want to become a new person to those who love me? Do I want to learn from him what truly matters in life, even though it may very well not be the benefits or achievements I have desired for myself? After all, if Jesus would grant all our wishes and guarantee our success on our terms and keep us healthy and comfortable to boot, who would not be Christian?

What I am admitting is that we have many ways of resisting the changes we believe we want in our lives and in ourselves. Sure, I would like more and better of what I enjoy, what makes me feel good, but do I really want the changes in my values, my attitudes, and my ways of responding to other people that truly entrusting my life to the way of Jesus and following him would bring? Or would that be asking for more than I'm ready to receive?

Bartimaeus rises to Jesus' question. "My teacher," he says, "let me see again." His life will not be the same. No longer blind, he cannot return to sitting by the roadside and begging while life passes him by. Now he must work and take back responsibility for the choices having his sight restored will thrust upon him.

By continuing to engage in the visioning process, this church has chosen to take responsibility for the changes it desires, responsibility for striving to become the church it hears Jesus Christ calling it be, on his terms and for his reasons. Very soon now, that visioning process will enter a new and crucial stage, and for your Visioning Team it has already begun. Change is coming, ready or not. People on the fringes of the church may choose to sit back and "see what happens" before deciding whether or not to participate. If too many make that choice, the changes will not be good. But if enough step up to do their part in being the church Jesus Christ calls First Presbyterian of Bridgeton to be, not just for its own sake but also and principally for the sake of people "out there," because God loves them too, then the changes will be good indeed. That is my prayer.

You can, however, be a Bartimaeus church together only if you are also seeking to answer Jesus' question as individuals and families. Otherwise, all the organization and planning in the world won't help much. What do you want Jesus to do for you? Do you want new life or merely comfort without change? Do you want to be called or just reassured? Do you want just more of the same, or are you ready for something new and exciting? The grace of God heals and revitalizes people who entrust themselves to it, and through those people God revitalizes churches.

Jesus tells Bartimaeus a strange and rather un-Presbyterian thing when he says, "Go; your faith has made you well." His faith? Is it not rather God's grace that has made the man well? Of course it is. It is always God's grace, not our faith by itself, that accomplishes any kind of salvation, but Bartimaeus is a human person, not a car that needs fixing. Human life is relational, and our primary relationship is with God. So God's grace seeks and requires our response. We must participate in the process of our own salvation. No physician can make me a healthy person if I don't participate by doing healthful things. God's grace is not magic that simply transforms us while we sit back and do nothing. "What has Jesus Christ ever done for me?" Well, what have I truly asked him to do for me? What have I put effort into learning from him? What changes have I sought in myself and my life on his terms?

On this Second Sunday of Easter, let us know that the future belongs to Christ. Let us know also that he will keep asking us what we want him to do for us, what we want to become by God's grace, and what will we step up to pursue. Those are the questions loaded with hope and hope's challenge to live anew. Amen.