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*The Amazing Story of Blind Bartimaeus*  
A message on Mark 10:46-52  
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This is an amazing story. It's amazing because there are many stories of Jesus healing people and casting out demons all throughout the Gospel of Mark—deaf people, people with fever, people with demons, people with withered hands, a bleeding woman and a dead little girl, to name just a few, and out of all these people, only Bartimaeus is mentioned by name. In fact, rarely in any of the Gospels is anyone who receives healing mentioned by name. You've got Lazarus being raised from the dead, and Mary Magdalene, who is described as someone from whom Jesus had cast out seven demons, and Bartimaeus. That's about it.

It's also an amazing story because there are only six verses to this story. You know, at the Silver Wings Supper that we had here at our church on Wednesday night, we played a game called "How Many Words Can You Make Out of the Word 'Presbyterian.'" And it turns out, quite a few! I believe the winning table actually found something like 150 words. And a fun way to read Bible stories sometimes is to ask, "How many take-aways can I find in this passage?" And in this short little story, there are a BUNCH. And today we'll look at six.

Now remember that Jesus has begun his journey to Jerusalem, the place where he is going to suffer and die and after three days be raised again, as he has explained to his disciples over and over. They come to the city of Jericho, which is about ten miles east and a bit north of Jerusalem. Jesus has picked up a sizable crowd along the way—it's not just Jesus and the twelve disciples anymore, but a whole caravan.

Bartimaeus hears who is passing by and begins to YELL— "Jesus! Son of David! Have mercy on me! ON ME!!!"—persistently and unapologetically demanding Jesus attention.

Hollering for help not for a sick mom, an ailing daughter, or a demon-possessed son, but for HIMSELF. The only other people in this Gospel bold enough to seek help from Jesus for themselves are a leper, who meekly kneels at Jesus' feet and diplomatically says, "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean"—if it's not too much trouble, Lord, if you wouldn't mind, Lord—AND—the hemorrhaging woman who is terrified to approach Jesus directly and can only bring herself to touch the hem of his robe. Bartimaeus can't see well enough to do either one of those things, and meanwhile the Jesus crowd is passing him by. So he belts it out for all he's worth. Not for anyone else. For himself.

Takeaway #1, it is OK to get in God's face and ask for healing for yourself. I've actually met people who are uncomfortable to ask for prayer for themselves. They can do it if it's for someone else, but not themselves. Bartimaeus shows once and for all, it is OK to advocate for yourself. It's OK to be direct and loud and assertive with God, not just for loved ones, but for yourself. Your life and your wellness matter to Jesus.

Which leads us to Takeaway #2. Jesus hears him, and Jesus stops. With ten miles to go, and a crowd surging and swirling around him, Jesus steps on the brakes and makes everybody else wait. For one person. Imagine the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade grinding to a halt because a kid won't stop riding around on his tricycle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street, or picture an entire presidential motorcade stopping so the president can give \$20 to a man holding a cardboard sign saying "Homeless Veteran anything will help God Bless You." One person! What does that tell us?

Last Saturday morning, we partnered with Forge, an organization of young professionals in their 20's and 30's here in Topeka, to host an event called "Inspiring a Healthy Community." The event included breakfast, some workshops on health-related topics and giveaway bags with

food and hygiene kits. We didn't know how many people would come—we knew to be ready for anywhere from zero to 250 people. It was up to the community health agencies to get the word out about this event—we were here to welcome and provide space and support as Forge ran the show. Over the course of several hours, maybe about 40 people from the community trickled in. Rather than wishing more people had come, we can look at it the way Jesus would: how absolutely wonderful that 40 people came! And even ONE hungry person coming and being fed would have been worth it. The ONE person whose stomach stops growling, who maybe even feels a sense of hope, because of the time they found food in our blessing box makes all the donations and effort to keep that box stocked worth it. The one kid who shows up for Sunday School is worth all the teacher's preparation. The one visitor who draws closer to God as a result of our worship is worth it, and so on, and so on. Takeaway #2 is the reminder for those of us seeking to do great things and make a big impact that the life of ONE person matters. If we feel like life is passing us by as we stay home caring for an elderly spouse or parent, or read Goodnight Moon for the 342<sup>nd</sup> time to a toddler, remember—Jesus stopped everything to heal ONE person.

Takeaway #3 is subtle. One of the things that draws us in to this short little story is the fact that as Bartimaeus is crying out to Jesus from the side of the road, the people around him don't want to hear it. It's not totally clear to me why. Maybe the people don't want Jesus to stop because they're all sharing in this wonderful feeling of momentum. Off we go to Jerusalem, where Jesus the messiah will do amazing things. We're making good time, we're making good time, let's go, let's go. Maybe Bartimaeus just sounds annoying, like a whiny kid on a long airplane flight, and maybe the "shush-ers" in the crowd think they're doing Jesus a favor. Or maybe Bartimaeus and his blindness are just something people don't want to think about, like

when you're in the middle of a great TV show and all of a sudden a commercial with starving, emaciated children pops up, or abused animals, and you know you should care, but you really don't want to think about that right now.

Whatever's going on, Jesus doesn't get mad at the crowd. He doesn't shame them or scold them for trying to silence this blind man whose only career path is begging for a living. He just stops, and tells them to call Bartimaeus, and the crowd is transformed. They stop shushing, and start encouraging. Cheer up, Bart! He's calling you! Because Bartimaeus is blind, they must have helped guide him as he made his way to Jesus.

Have you seen that documentary about Mr. Rogers, called "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" Mr. Rogers was not one to shame people either, especially not children, his target audience. One particularly hot issue during the early years of his TV show was integration. The documentary showed some old news footage of a white motel owner pouring acid into his segregated motel swimming pool to force African Americans out of it. It's hard to believe, but I guess many white people were afraid to swim in the same pools as people of color. One day on his show, in 1969, Mr. Rogers filled up a little wading pool out in his backyard, and sat there soaking his bare feet in it. Officer Clemmons, an African American character on the show, drops by, and Mr. Rogers says, "I'm just soaking my feet in this pool because my feet are tired. Would you like to join me?" And he does. And that's all. No shaming or scolding of bigoted white people, just this image of a white man and his black friend side by side, with their feet in the same pool, with who knows how many children watching on TV.

We ARE called to speak out against racism and sexism and every form of injustice, BUT—Takeaway #3—and we know this—it's what we DO that people remember. And shaming and scolding are never as effective as a courageous act of grace.

Takeaway #4 is the gentle reminder that it is in the interruptions that life seems to happen. Jesus isn't on his preaching and healing tour anymore. That part of this gig is OVER. He's headed to the city where he knows he will die. I'd be stressed! I'd be pretty wrapped up in my own fears and my own problems. Talk about having a lot on your mind. Whew. Yet Jesus allows himself to be interrupted, even at this point where he must have realized he can't heal everybody. This healing story that almost didn't happen is the one story where the person who is healed is remembered today by name.

What are your interruptions? Can we learn to handle our interruptions with the same grace and openness that Jesus did?

Along those lines is Takeaway #5: Who is calling for our help right now? What person, what issue, just won't leave us alone? Who or what is crying out to us for mercy? Is it refugees? Kids who don't have enough to eat? Homeless people? Lonely senior citizens with no one to check on them? Do we keep ourselves so busy and moving forward so fast that we can't hear anybody?

Now I'm not Jesus, and you're not Jesus, but together, we are the body of Christ. The Holy Spirit is working today, through the body of Christ, and Christ took the time to stop, listen and find out. Who needs healing and hope today? Who needs us to remember their name? This would be a good topic to discuss in your Sunday School classes and Bible Study groups and committee meetings, or even just around the table with coffee and snacks in Disciples Hall after worship today.

Finally, Takeaway #6. Let us never underestimate the power of faith. Perhaps you were struck as I was by Jesus saying to Bartimaeus, "Your faith has made you well." Whenever I read that phrase, I pay attention. Bartimaeus is not the only person to whom Jesus says this. He said

it to others, including, notably, the hemorrhaging woman who touched his clothing. Jesus can do anything, but Jesus does not force himself on anyone, and it seems that our faith has a role to play in healing. It's interesting that in the other story in Mark's Gospel about Jesus healing a blind man, Jesus has to take him out of the village and put saliva on the man's eyes, and it takes a couple of tries before the man can see clearly. And Jesus doesn't say, "Your faith has made you well."

This week, I noticed that the drain in my shower had a bit of a sewer odor to it, so I googled what to do, and after pouring a bunch of boiling hot water down the drain, I then poured some vinegar. Then I dumped a bunch of baking soda in there. Wooo! Such fizzing and bubbling! Vinegar by itself is great, and baking soda by itself is great, but together—wow! My drain is squeaky clean now.

I think when the power of God meets faith, it's a little like vinegar and baking soda coming together and acting in a way that neither can do on their own. I'm not sure about all the chemical properties, but if scripture counts for anything, faith makes a difference, and faith has very little to do with being able to agree with a checklist of particular beliefs, and a whole lot to do with the willingness to persevere in crying out to God, to jump up and throw off whatever might weigh us down, as Bartimaeus did with his cloak which was very likely the only worthwhile material item he owned in the entire world, and to accept all the responsibility, all the joy and pain that comes with being able to see.

What an amazing story. May our own stories be equally amazing. May Christ have mercy on each one of us, as he did with Bartimaeus. May Christ have mercy on the people of the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, especially the families of the 11 people who were killed, and the officer who was wounded. Lord, have mercy on people who overflow with hate. Lord,

have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy upon us. Give us grace and courage to see you at work in all things, even this, we pray. Amen.