***WHAT DO YOU WANT?***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

October 25, 2015

Texts: Mark 10:46-52 and Psalm 34:1-10

 He was seated by the side of the Jericho road at the edge of the city limits. His eyes looked but could not see the road in front of him. A tattered cloak hung from his shoulders and gathered around his bare feet in the dust of his roadside perch. He was no different in appearance from any of the other blind souls who gathered along Palestine’s pedestrian paths with arms outstretched and palms upturned, crying: “Alms for the poor!” Begging was his living – asking unseen passersby for the spare change from their pockets, a few copper coins to buy a meal or repair a tattered tunic. His name was Bartimaeus, literally Son of Timaeus, but his father was nowhere to be found. He had no one to provide for him, so there he sat in the dust, living on the literal and figurative edge of Jericho’s society.

 You have seen Bartimaeus! His are the trembling hands holding a Styrofoam cup as he begs coins for a cup of coffee, the threadbare gloves holding the cardboard sign reading: “Work for Food”, the outstretched arm and upturned hand that grabs your conscience as you hurry by on the sidewalk just out of reach, with your head down and your eyes turned away. The streets of our cities, not unlike the road to Jericho, are homes to those on the edge of societ in need of food, shelter, clothing or healing. They are home to the Bartimaeuses whom you have met along the way.

 This week there was an article in the *Washington Post* about a warehouse of storage units near the Capitol that are to be torn down to make way for a high rise hotel with yet more stores and offices.[[1]](#endnote-1) To many in the city that is good news, but to the hundreds of homeless folks for whom a storage unit is home, it is a disaster. The manager of the storage units knows the folks who come and go there. Many of them work full-time or part-time but cannot afford rents in the city, so they sleep where they can and return to the $30 a month storage unit each morning to change clothes or wash up or relax on a day off. There are strict rules prohibiting drugs, alcohol, guns and violence of any kind; no one is allowed to sleep overnight there. The rules are pretty well followed, for there is no other option for these folks for whom a 5x8 storage unit is the closest thing to home they know. Too often these are the folks who are invisible to us, those who live near to where we live or walk or work, and yet we pass them by without a thought or a glance, forgetting that they too are children of God!

 Bartimaeus was one of those children of God who had nothing, except what he received from the generosity of others. He might have been sitting there for a lifetime had Jesus not happened by or had the blind man simply followed the orders of those who told him to shut up, keep quiet and stop making a spectacle of himself. But upon hearing that Jesus was near he cried out again and again and again, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” What made him cry out so insistently? Was it something that he knew or heard or hoped for from Jesus? Or was it something that moved his heart at the name, “Jesus of Nazareth”? Who did he think this man was, this Jesus of Nazareth from whom he sought mercy?

 How would you answer that question? If you were standing there beside Bartimaeus when the rumble of the crowd and the whispers “Jesus of Nazareth” reached his ears and he turned to you to ask, “Who is he?” what would you say? Who do you say that Jesus is – you who come here week in and week out to sing your praise and raise your prayers and listen to yet another sermon from a bald-headed preacher? Who is Jesus to you? A healer? An exemplar of faith and faithfulness? A good man among good men? Friday we took the confirmation class to a prayer service at the Islamic Center in Harrisonburg where we were warmly welcomed; they know Jesus as a prophet, but as a prophet only. Is that who he is to you – a prophet? Or is he the savior, the Son of God who takes away the sins of the world? It is perhaps the most basic question of ***our*** faith and of ***your*** faith. Who is Jesus to you?

 Bartimaeus declared him to be the Son of David which was a royal title. In his plea from the dusty pavement he not only called Jesus by name, he declared his belief that Jesus was the one for whom the people had been waiting – the Son of David, heir to the throne, the Messiah, a title befitting one who would be crucified “King of the Jews”. Compassion and help were the substance of Bartimaeus’ plea: “Have mercy on me!” But faith was the form of his plea: “Jesus, Son of David!” Do you have such faith – faith enough to persistently, insistently call on the name of Jesus for help or mercy in dealing with the dilemmas in your life? Or are you more likely to be one of those in the crowd – quiet yourself and urging others to be quiet as well?

 Bartimaeus would not be silenced. Again and again he cried out from the dust until Jesus finally heard his voice, stopped, and called Bartimaeus to him; Jesus did not go to Bartimaeus on the side of the road, but called Bartimaeus to him. Suddenly the crowd that had been sternly shushing the blind man became his friends, encouraging him to take heart and go to Jesus. How quickly people’s attitudes can change! And so Bartimaeus threw off his cloak, leapt to his feet, and rushed to where Jesus stood. Standing there right in front of the blind man Jesus asked a curious question of him: “What do you want me to do for you?” It was the same question Jesus had asked James and John when they came to him with a question about their place in glory. What do you want me to do for you? Was it not obvious? Did Jesus really not know what Bartimaeus wanted? Or was it a test to see what Bartimaeus thought Jesus might be capable of doing? How many people had passed by the blind man with his outstretched hand and offered what they had to give – a few copper coins. Was that all that he now wanted from Jesus – a few copper coins – or did he believe Jesus could offer something more?

 *What do you want me to do for you?* It is the question Jesus poses to all of us. What is it that you want from Jesus? Do you want healing for your body, soul or spirit or for someone you love? Do you want insight or inspiration? Do you want a little more faith, a little more patience, a little more peace for your soul or perhaps a little less anxiety, a little less turmoil, a little less doubt in your life? Do you want forgiveness for yesterday’s sins, or strength for the challenges of today, or hope for the days to come? What is it that you want from Jesus here and now? Jesus urges us to speak from the heart in saying what we want, to dare to believe that all things are possible for him and through him for us. What then do you want? Or are you afraid to ask because you doubt that he can deliver?

 Bartimaeus said that he wanted to see, and so Jesus gave him healing for his eyes and a new path for his life. “Go. Your faith has made you well.,” said Jesus. To be *made well* by Jesus is not simply to be more physically sound. It is to be saved from “every trouble”, to be delivered from “all your fears”, in the words of the psalmist. To be *made well* by Jesus is to find a refuge from your anxieties and a balm for your pain. It is to enter that mighty fortress that is our God, a bulwark never failing, to quote Martin Luther! That was the wellness Bartimaeus received. It is the healing Jesus offers: healing for body, soul and spirit!

 We are sometimes too hesitant to ask. Like Martin Luther we may doubt that we are worthy to receive anything at all. And of course we are not. Jesus does not ask what we want because we have earned an answer. Jesus asks us solely and surely as an act of grace. That is the testimony of the Gospels and Paul and John Newton who penned *Amazing Grace* and countless saints from within these walls. We are not saved because we have earned salvation. We are saved despite who we have been, because God is gracious and loving. Jesus said Bartimaeus’ faith had made him well, for his faith had moved him to call out to Jesus and to come when he called and to ask for the impossible to be done and to trust that Jesus could do what Bartimaeus asked. Perhaps our failing is that we ask too little because we believe too little is possible instead of believing that all things are possible!

 Bartimaeus became a follower of Jesus “on the way” for he believed that with Jesus’ Way all things – even healing of eyes long blind – were possible. In the early years of the church, those who followed Jesus were sometimes called the Way. The Way of Jesus is a new way – a new way of being, a new way of living, a new way of looking at the world, a way in which as Brian McLaren describes it, “everything must change.” Just as Bartimaeus saw a whole new world before him with new eyes, so those who follow Jesus on the Way have their eyes opened to a new world with a new path to walk. “Faith is not an intellectual exercise;” writes Diana Butler Bass, “it is a spiritual path.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Faith is not believing that a wheelbarrow could be pushed across a tightrope across the Grand Canyon; faith is getting in the wheelbarrow. It is putting into practice what you say you believe, walking a new path, living a new life, following a new Way.

 Is that new Way, your way – or are you following some other way? All around us people are crying out in need, seeking help and compassion and healing. They are poor folks gathering at the doors of SACRA, Syrian refugees seeking a home away from the violence, and the orphans of war in Iraq longing to be loved. If we would follow the Way of Jesus, then we are called to answer their cry and meet their needs as instruments of God’s grace even as we are recipients of that amazing grace. So then, my brothers and sisters, what do you want Jesus to do for you – and through you? Amen

1. “For D.C.’s Desperate, a Refuge from Homelessness is About to Disappear”, Petula Dvorak, *The Washington Post*, October 22, 2015 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, HarperOne, 2012, p.213 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)