

BLIND BARTIMAEUS



Mark 10:47 "When (blind Bartimaeus, sitting by the roadside) heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth (who was passing by), he began to shout out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' Jesus stood still and said, 'Call him here.'"

Sadly, there are many people in every culture, who like the blind beggar on the side of the road in today's reading, are generally not seen, not heard, who are not noticed, and who are

functionally or socially invisible to those around them. Now as a privileged white male in this society, I am not usually ignored, so when it has happened, I have been shocked and surprised at the experience of being overlooked and of being discounted. One time, I had ventured into a high-end men's clothing store on Fifth Avenue in New York City, in my baggy blue jeans and threadbare sweater, to buy a new shirt for my son's wedding. I received one arched eyebrow from the salesperson who then ignored me for the next five minutes. It was clear that I didn't fit in, that I wasn't wanted, even as a privileged white male in our society. I just wasn't the right kind of privileged white male apparently. Thus I have some sense of how very shocking it is to suddenly be invisible, unheard, a nuisance to be silenced or ignored, to be labeled one of "those people," the ones that are different from us, the ones that don't fit into to our preconceived notions, the ones that we really don't want to see, perhaps because they remind us of something we don't want to face, like disease or handicap, or racial prejudice or social classism, or just threadbare sweaters, and so --- sadly there are many people who generally go unseen and unnamed in every culture. I just left the store without comment or note.

Often when the unseen do speak up, they are sternly told to be quiet, as in today's gospel reading. They are put back into

their place. If they insist on their due, they are often shouted down. Their needs and their requests for fair treatment are often dismissed as impertinent. Just who do they think they are? Teachers don't notice their hands in class. The lines they stand in are dominated by the whims of the privileged, not them. Take the women in the Bible, for example, who are rarely named, even when they are the center of significant stories. We do not name those who are not important to us, those whom we prefer to ignore or dismiss.

Thus, one of the most interesting things about this story in today's Gospel reading is that the poor blind beggar on the side of the road is actually named, Bartimaeus, a strange hybrid name, part Aramaic and part Greek, suggesting a certain authenticity to the story. Moreover, not only is he named, but so is his father. This is a truly remarkable thing. Indeed, Bartimaeus is in fact the only recipient of a healing story in all of Mark's Gospel who is specifically named. Luke seems to tell this same story of a certain blind beggar at Jericho who was healed by Jesus, but he doesn't name him. In Matthew's version of this story, there are actually two blind beggars on the road, but they are both go unnamed. So why is his name remembered by Gospel writer of Mark. The key may be in the last verse of today's reading, when Jesus says to Bartimaeus, 'Go (your way); your faith has made you well.' Jesus sends

Bartimaeus off, healed, but apparently, he doesn't go away. Instead, he followed Jesus. 'Immediately,' we are told, 'Bartimaeus regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way.' One suspects that as a follower of Jesus, he later told his story again and again, and his name was remembered, at least by some.

When I reviewed this Gospel reading years ago at a weekly African Bible Study at a former parish, several of us immediately were reminded of Pope Francis' recent visit to the United States, and how Pope Francis would break out of his entourage to go over to those who are generally unseen, like the man in the wheelchair at St. Patrick's Cathedral or the handicapped child at the airport line waiting to see the Pope. Neither of those individuals even called out to be noticed, like the poor blind beggar in today's story, but Pope Francis noticed them anyway and went over to speak with them. Pope Francis, unlike most of us, seems to generally notice people who, like beggars on the roadside, are generally overlooked.

There is an ancient proverb that reads "There are none so blind as those who will not see." We are the blind ones here, I fear, those who do not see, do not see the marginalized people in our society, pushed off into the corner and told to keep quiet, those who look or speak differently than us, excluded from our company and our society, people of a different socio-

economic class perhaps, or a different race or religion, or who speak a different tongue; those who live elsewhere, on the edges or margins of our community. *And thus we are being calling upon by this Gospel to recover our own sight and to see the poor and downtrodden in our midst,* beyond the gates and barriers we have created to protect us from them, to see those in need in our own community, the clients at our local food bank, the learners at the table with our Literacy Volunteers, students of the Community Culinary School, or the undocumented in our villages, or the refugees, these are our own neighbors in this place and the Gospel calls us to see and hear them, to hear the blind beggar on the side of the road calling out, where just hearing them may will bring some measure of recognition and healing.

For in today's reading, the crowd instead sternly ordered the blind beggar on the side of the road to be quiet and stand aside. Jesus and his disciples were bound for Jerusalem; they had a venerable mission to accomplish, they had an agenda, a timetable. They were important people and the blind beggar on the side of the road was not. He was a distraction. He was a nuisance. They had no room for his intrusions. Jesus' entourage thought their Godly calling was all about them. They were just last week arguing about who was the greatest among them, and who would sit on Jesus' right and left hand in the Kingdom. They were already calculating the benefits of being his followers.

They were blind to the poor blind beggar on the side of the road. For "there are none so blind as those who will not see."

Yet that blind beggar on the side of the road had a deep personal desire for healing, and a personal determination to get help somehow, and a belief that Jesus was the one who could provide it. He had faith. In a simplicity that we probably should emulate, he simply cried out to Jesus of Nazareth as he passed before him, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" And when the crowd tried to silence him, he shouted again, even more louder than before. Yes, he added to the noise of an already noisy world. Yes, his was but one voice among many, among the throng. Yet, Jesus heard his call. Yes, he threatened to delay this important procession of theirs to Jerusalem. He frustrated those who were looking out for the many, but who were ignoring the few, the ones along the margin.

And yet that poor blind beggar on the side of the road called out anyway. Forget about being appropriate or polite. Forget about propriety. Forget about acknowledging his place in society. He believed that Jesus could help him, and he called out. If we believe Jesus can help, then we need to cry out to Jesus too, because this story tells us, that God is listening, and that we should be listening too. When the entourage tells them to make an appointment or go around back, they will cry out again, louder. When the established church pushes them and their

needs aside, we should take notice. When our institutions try to ignore them, we should stand still and call them over. We should see them; we should hear their voices; and we should engage with them and bring some sense of healing into their lives.

Because God has never been about propriety. Despite what the custodians of propriety and privilege say. God is just wild enough to notice each fallen sparrow on the ground, to care about each hair on our heads, to notice the lilies in the field, and to hear the cries of those shoved off to the side of the road and to respond. And so should we. Amen.