

Sermon for October 27, 2024,
The Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost at St. Michael's Church
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This week's readings include Mark's pivotal story of Jesus and Bartimaeus, an account of the true nature of faith, courage, healing – and what being a “disciple” really means.

This passage is a gateway to Jesus' triumphant arrival in Jerusalem. As we've seen over the past few weeks, the primary theme of this central section in Mark is what it means to “see,” understand, and follow Jesus, the Messiah who comes not on a warhorse but as a suffering servant. Three times Jesus explains this, and three times the disciples fail to see. And now in this week's story, to culminate this section, Mark presents Bartimaeus as an ideal disciple: he is blind, but he exceeds the disciples in insight; he is a poor beggar, but he exceeds the rich man in leaving behind his possessions; and though the cross is just around the corner, he does not “Go,” as Jesus tells him to do, but rather courageously stays and follows Jesus “on the Way” to the cross.

In his cry for mercy, Bartimaeus addresses Jesus as “Son of David,” a powerful, political, messianic title — and he repeats it even more loudly when “many sternly ordered him to be quiet.” Why do they try to silence him? Do they consider him too unclean, too lowly a figure to bother the holy teacher? Or

maybe they worried that such blunt political language will draw unwanted attention from the imperial authorities, especially as Jesus approaches Jerusalem? Or perhaps a bit of both?

Hearing Bartimaeus, Jesus stops in his tracks and sends for him. Bartimaeus “throws off his cloak” and comes to Jesus. Mark often uses “cloaks” to symbolize a dramatic shift, such as a person leaving behind the old order of things. Mark may also be suggesting that this gesture distinguishes Bartimaeus from the rich man, who could not bring himself to part with his possessions.

It might at first seem obvious that when Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus, he is asking for his eyesight to be restored — but this only makes it more surprising that Jesus doesn’t heal him immediately. Instead, he asks him the same question he has just put to James and John: “What do you want me to do for you?” (Mark 10:36; 10:51). The question does at least two things at once: first, it shows that Jesus wants Bartimaeus to play an active, engaged role in his own restoration; and second, it sets up a vivid contrast between James and John on the one hand, and Bartimaeus on the other. While the supposed “insiders,” James and John, display spiritual pride with their answer, wanting seats of honor beside Jesus in glory, the supposed “outsider” exemplifies a blend of boldness and humility: “My teacher, let me see again,” he says — a request that, in the context of this

central section in Mark, has both physical and spiritual meaning. Jesus describes the event as emerging primarily from Bartimaeus' audacious, humble, openhearted faith. And his boldness continues: though Jesus tells him to "Go," Bartimaeus instead decides to come along, following Jesus on the Way — even though they're about to face a showdown in Jerusalem with Jesus on the path to crucifixion. Bartimaeus faithfully and boldly followed.

Jesus reminds us that there are many "outsiders" we encounter in our society today. Yet God loves them equally. These "outsiders" are the marginalized, the voiceless, the forgotten, the sick and homeless. They are the children, and the aged who are often treated as a nuisances. Yet each day, they are crying out for help. Are we telling them to quiet down, do we think they are an embarrassment? Jesus hears their cries even if we don't.

Infants and young children are among the weakest in our society. Which leads us to why the Episcopal Church baptizes infants and young children, as we will be witnesses next week in our Baptism service. We may ask the question, why do we baptize infants and young children who seem to not be able to make a choice on their own about wanting to be baptized? The Episcopal Church allows for infant and children baptism because we believe in the dignity of all infants and young children. The belief of our church is two fold: First, infants

are baptized so that they can be full members of the community of faith, the Body of Christ, and can grow up being formed by that fellowship and sharing in all the benefits. Children are honored as complete human beings in the Episcopal Church, and they are considered worthy of “citizenship in the Covenant,” that is, the sacred agreement between God and God’s people. But the most important to remember is that God acts in the sacrament of baptism. Never underestimate the power of God. We may think that an infant or a child has neither understanding of what is happening in the baptismal rite nor any capacity to make the required promises, but we have no idea how God is acting in that child’s life. Even infants have a faith life. To deny this, or to assume that they need to be of a certain age or ability to engage in a life of faith, is to treat them as less than fully human. This also applies to people we know with mental disabilities as well.

I have a 42-year-old Autistic nephew name Derek and we all love him very much. He is the most sweet, loving, innocent person we know. He loves the Lord, attends church each Sunday sitting with his dad and mom in the first row. If you ask Derek to explain his faith, he mostly can’t, but we know he loves Jesus. My brother, who had never entered an Episcopal Church, came to my ordination at St. John’s Cathedral with Derek. During the service, Derek must have gotten a bit antsy, and when he couldn’t control his autistic behavior,

someone SHHHed him. My brother told me this a few weeks later and was quite hurt. I felt very embarrassed. At their church recently, they had a talent show in which one of the acts featured Derek and all the other congregants who have learning disabilities. I believe their act was received with the loudest applause. Jesus did not SHH Bartimaeus but had compassion on him.

So, what are our takeaway learning from this passage today?

In Mark, the definition of “faith” is typically a synonym for courage, a form of fearlessness, boldness and bravery, and this week’s story is no exception.

Bartimaeus boldly calls out to Jesus; refuses to be silent, even if it causes waves with the majority; he leaves behind his possessions; asks brazenly for healing and insight; and follows Jesus all the way to Jerusalem. For Mark, he is nothing less than the model disciple, he is bold, discerning, humble, direct, and courageous.

Likewise, this passage reflects on what “healing” means in Christian life. As this story suggests, healing can have to do with how we “see” or understand the world as with any physical cure. God’s restorative power typically comes “up from within.” Our faith — which is to say, our bold and humble courage — is both a gracious gift of God and a vital source of our everyday wellbeing.

This week, with the permission of one of our parishioners, I'd like to share a story we had to emphasize this point. A parishioner's friend called him up from out of state and needed to talk to him about her son who just came out to her. As an evangelical Christian, she was in a dilemma, an intersection in her life. She thought she had to make a choice between accepting her son as someone who is beloved by God, or someone that her church teaches her is sinful and worthy of condemnation. This parishioner has experience dealing with the LGBTQ issues, and was the perfect person for her to talk to. This story shows us how Jesus is present in bringing healing in 2024. Our parishioner with compassion helped her "see" the world through Jesus' eyes. Jesus' restorative power comes from within us. This is the never-ending work of the Holy Spirit in ways we can never plan or imagine. We are the tools in which the Holy Spirit works in the lives of others.

Bartimaeus' story reminds us that again and again, Jesus calls us to "take heart" and trust, and at the same time, to step forward and play an active role in our own ongoing restoration, asking us: *What do you want me to do for you?*

What do you want Jesus to do for you today? Will you be like Bartimaeus who sees, understands and courageously follows Jesus. The crucial lesson

Bartimaeus leaves for us is what he did after he was healed. He didn't go away and forget Jesus, but instead, he lived a new way of living. As Mark tells it, he is "the last" disciple to join the fold — and as we heard Jesus say just a few verses ago, "the last will be first..."

Today is the last Sunday in our 2025 Stewardship Campaign. At St. Michael's, we are dedicated to creating new possibilities for our spiritual expansion, fostering an environment in which we are not afraid to challenge ourselves and take risks of faith. This week's Gospel story is about faith and courage to seek, and to dedicate our lives to a new way of living as disciples of Christ. Let us continue to boldly come to Jesus, not to wait for him to ask us, "What do you want me to do for you?" But instead, for us to ask him in this coming year, "What can I do for you Jesus?"

Amen.