

A Sermon for DaySpring

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“A Clipboard full of Questions”

Mark 10: 6-52

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The gospels aren't self-interpreting stories. And that's a good thing. It's really a rare thing in one of these good news narratives about Jesus, that the author says, **“Let me tell you what to think about what you just read.”** Occasionally, one of them will pull the reader aside to put a bug in the ear... or in the mind... but that's not the norm. They just lay it out there.

Paul... the Apostle and Apologist, is always defining and codifying and nailing down what God meant when God showed up in Jesus. The Gospel writers don't attempt that.

They're open books.

Open for discussion and insight.

And open for our questions.

Often, we read a story and on some days, most of what we find ourselves doing is asking questions. That happened for me, on Thursday morning, on my clipboard. That's where my sermons start. It's sort of a holy tablet for me. I had several pages of questions on the holy clipboard and thought they might ought to be asked out loud.

I asked a lot of questions about Bartimaeus. Has he always been blind? Blind and begging from birth? Does it run in the family? Is his father begging too? Or was this condition from some illness? Was he once a merchant here on Main Street?

What's his character? What's his heart like... has it become jaded as a professional beggar? Is he angry about his blindness? Guilty about it? Has it made him more sensitive? As a poor person, is he in touch with the Kingdom of heaven as Jesus said he would be? Is he spiritually sensitive, seeing in ways others can't?

What does he know about Jesus of Nazareth? What has he heard? Does he call out because that's what he always does if anyone comes by who's a traveling miracle worker? (There were plenty of them.) Does he call out in belief or because he has nothing to lose?

And why does he call him Son of David? Is it manipulative flattery? Or is this a confession too?

Does he just grab that title out of thin air? (It's the only time it's used in Mark.) Is he saying, **“I believe you are the Messiah?”**

Is he, religiously sophisticated, thinking about the book of Samuel and that prophesied Son of David who will dispense God's mercy? And is that why he yells over and over **“Have mercy on me?”**

Or does he yell over this noisy city street, **“have mercy, have mercy, Jesus have mercy”** because he's desperate? Sick and tired of his limitation and his predicament?

Those are some of the questions about Bartimaeus on my clipboard. And they soon became questions about me? ... And about my own need for God's mercy? And

whether or not I know I need it? Would I scream for it? Beg God for it? Or am I too self-sufficient for that?

Have I cried out? Is this my instinct?

And do I believe God would help? Or do I have my doubts? Is my hesitance to call out not about my need but my fear that God won't help or that God can't help? I'm not sure which is worse, to not know you need help or to know it and believe there is no help available.

Those are some of my Bartimaeus questions. And I think Mark wanted them asked out loud.

I have a lot of crowd questions too. Why does this crowd want to shut him up?

That's a good question, don't you think? In Mark's gospel, the crowds are always around... here and there. The crowd is always playing a role and it's not always a positive one.

They wear Jesus out and he has to sail away from them.

Some men are trying to get a crippled friend into a house to see Jesus but they can't get near the house because of the crowd. His family can't get into see him... because there's too big a crowd. And in another story a woman who's been on a permanent menstrual cycle has to push her way through the crowd just to touch the hem of his garment.

The crowd is hungry in one chapter needing food for the stomach and in the next chapter they're rushing away from the Teachers of the Law to get some Soul Food from Jesus.

The crowd shouts, "**Hosanna, save us now.**" And the crowd shouts, "**Release Barabus.**"

In today's story the crowd is trying to hush a blind man who is calling out. Why? Maybe they're embarrassed of him. Everyone in Jericho knows the guy. He's been sitting there for years. Does he annoy them? Are they weary of taking care of him? Bartimaeus burnout????

Or has he just burned them? Do they assume he's got something up his sleeve... or a skeleton in his closet? Maybe that's it... he's a sinner for sure or he wouldn't be blind? Is that why they try to shut him up. Let's keep the bad guy away from this good guy? Mark doesn't say.

Maybe it's not about Bartimaeus... but it's about them.

They want Jesus for themselves.

They want a healing...

or some teaching.

Maybe this crowd making their way down main street is listening to Jesus teach. That would be a typical classroom look during those days. Folks walking behind a Rabbi while they taught, "**The Kingdom of God is like... a man with two sons... It's like a guy who has a fig tree... or a dry cleaning business.**"

Maybe Bartimaeus' screaming is interrupting a perfectly good parable. "**Shut up Bartimaeus, we can't hear Jesus.**"

Are they enjoying a lesson? Or are they all excited about what they think he's about to do. He woke up that morning ready to walk on into Jerusalem. Jesus has his game face on.

It's just fifteen miles away.

It's Palm Sunday.

Time to whip some Romans into shape,
not heal a blind guy.

Enough of those prelims... it's game time.

All we know is that the crowd gets in the way. They "shush" Bartimaeus.

"Shusssssshhh," and I'm wondering why they did that to a beggar?

Of course, that question begs other questions. Questions about us... and the kind of crowd we are.

In that regard, historically speaking, the crowd around Jesus, the church has not always fared so well. The crowd doesn't always help people to see the truth about God. The inquisition and the crusades and segregation were fueled by enthusiastic crowds around Jesus.

Crowds don't always help people to see the heart of God... and so on my clipboard, there is this question about what kind of crowd we are and whether are not folks who need to get to Jesus can... or are we in the way.

Before you answer too quickly, remember that it's easier to see this problem in other crowds... crowds of which we're not apart. It's the hazard of being in the crowd, huh?

I was channel surfing the other night and saw a religious service on one of those religious stations. They were worshipping and they had a little five-year old boy out on stage break dancing to an old Jackson Five Tune that they'd change the lyrics. I'm not certain, but I think that might be a crowd in the way.

People would like to get to Jesus, I figure. And it's not always certain that those of us following along and crowded around are helping. Even when we intend to help... even when our intentions are good.

Some people talk with such certainty and such syrupy-sweetness shallowness about Jesus... that I think folks who need Jesus aren't drawn to him.

I wondered this week on my clipboard, if it's possible to get so busy building a church building that church doesn't happen. Did all the hammers drowned out some beggar crying in our midst?

Some hurting person...

getting missed because of our agenda...

Does that happen in this crowd?

Where brokenness is an inconvenience????

It's like when someone's car breaks down in traffic... And the crowd is honking... yelling... and gesturing... in anger and frustration... **"Can't you see we're all trying to get somewhere?"** There are those, thank God, who pull over and go knock on the window and say, **"Can I help?"**

I was asking questions on my clipboard about this crowd and hoping we aren't missing people and hoping that we're a crowd who knocks on the window and says, **"Can we help... if we can't we know someone who can."**

Those are some of my crowd questions. And I asked them out loud because Mark made room for them.

I also have some questions about Jesus. He didn't heal everyone? Why now? He didn't restore everyone's sight? Why Bartimaeus'?

Jesus said, his (Bartimaeus') faith healed him? Wasn't it Jesus' power too? Or was it this man's faith alone?

And what was his faith? Was it the way he yelled out obnoxiously... persistently? Is that faith enough? Is it that he says the magic messianic words, **"Son of David?"** Is it his understanding that makes for healing faith? Is it his admission of need, **"Have mercy?"**

Is it that he asked so directly, **"I want to see?"**

Did Jesus sense something in him?

Or in this moment that warranted a miracle?

Was there some special work for Bartimaeus to do?

If you had a holy clipboard, you'd probably write some question like this on it. Why Bartimaeus? And not other faith filled souls, maybe some you've loved, who've cried out for mercy, with great persistence and all the right theology about Jesus? Would your clipboard have a question like that? Or maybe you'd write out in big letters, **"Where's my miracle?"**

I've wondered this week, why Jesus tells him to **"go"** and not to follow. Bartimaeus is given permission to go and not to follow him to Jerusalem... Bartimaeus disobeys and follows and were I in his sandals I'd have done that too. But aren't you curious about why this believer gets sent home and others are told to leave home?

And on my clipboard????? **"Does following Jesus mean going home for some of us and leaving home for others of us?"**

Questions everywhere. And that's good because Mark and his gospel writing colleagues, wrote their stories so the church would sit around and we'd ask our questions out loud... to one another and to God. I can't get to answers by myself with my clipboard, holy as it is, in my lap. But if I ask them out loud to people of faith, I might experience something... that makes them easier to bear and maybe even hear something that sounds like an answer.

One of you'd say, **"Bartimaeus is desperate, I think... and it's not until we're really desperate that we reach out for God's mercy. The journey,"** you'd tell me, **"doesn't begin with the correct theology... It begins with the word, 'help'... until we get that word out, we don't understand grace."**

And to my clipboard questions about the crowd, someone other of you might say, **"I've really been helped by this crowd. I've been introduced to Christ through this crowd and it gives me great hope for the church."**

Maybe someone else would tell me about how some other church carried you through your childhood... it was a rough childhood, but there was this church down the street.

Another of you'd remind me that in spite of all her flaws, this crowd around Jesus, called the Church, is all over the world right now offering cups of cool water in the name of Christ.

And if I can dare ask my questions about why Jesus heals... or doesn't heal, if I can ask painful and hard questions like that... one of you might say, **"That's the first thing I'll ask him someday when I see him, but in the meantime, you should know that I think all of us are being healed... at least if we're open to it. In little ways mostly, when we open our hearts things do change in our lives."**

Another of you'd chime in, **"My circumstances changed over time. It was a miracle, I think."**

Another, **"I think my prayers to Jesus made things better for my dad even though he still died."**

Someone else, **"I haven't gotten my miracle yet... but I'm still calling out for it."**

Another... **"I was so hurt... so messed up by life, but my wounds healed... and now they're a source of great grace."**

Well, that's what you might say... that's what might happen, if I could ask my questions out loud... or if you could.

I think that's what these gospel writers wanted... the church talking out the story of Jesus so that we might live it out.

And, for what it's worth, I think we're doing that... we're that kind of place. Full of Gospel questions and gospel mystery and even a few humble answers. Thanks be to God.