

Words matter and so does context. Yesterday morning Pat Parker and I drove to Laurens to attend the funeral of one of the originators of the Monday hot breakfast group. Dennis, along with a group of other faithful volunteers, for the last six or so years has been arriving here at Triune on Mondays at 5:00 am to prepare grits and eggs for over 125 people- particularly 125 people experiencing homelessness or just barely getting by financially. As the pastor got up to preach, she read the gospel story in Luke and then she opened with how she met Dennis. She had served as a pastor at a church here in Greenville that hosted the breakfast before it moved to Triune. New to the church, one day she arrived to help with the breakfast, and many of the volunteers thought she was experiencing homelessness. I thought she was maybe saying this to a sea of white folks as she was a woman of color. But then she said, "I must have looked hideous that day." The sanctuary erupted in laughter, but Pat and I looked at each other and said, "Ouch. That didn't feel good." Over to the right of us a few pews away sat two of our parishioners from Triune who caught a ride with another of the Monday morning breakfast volunteers. I watched to try and get a sense of their reaction to her words and to the laughter. I wondered if she thought through her context and how her comment might be heard, yet I also understand that we all have our blind spots. I then began wondering if these two men, who eat breakfast on Mondays at Triune, were used to being the butt of a joke, dismissed or shushed like Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, in today's story in Mark's gospel. You see words matter and so does context. Let's listen to a word from God but first let us **PRAY**.

Mark 10:46-52 (CEB).

Mark concludes the middle section of his gospel, which began with a story of restored sight (8:22-26), with both this healing and calling story. This is Jesus' final healing in Mark's Gospel, and the last stop before his triumphal entry on a donkey into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday when people throw their coats onto the road and wave their palm branches and shout "Hosanna," which means "save now." In today's story Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting on the side of the dusty road in Jericho, which is a few miles outside Jerusalem. As I sat in the funeral service yesterday I thought of this morning's scripture and wondered if Bartimaeus felt he looked hideous even though he couldn't see how he looked. I then wondered about what an easy target for blame or shame Bartimaeus probably was- sitting very vulnerably by the road with his coat spread out in front of him or his hands out hoping for the generosity of others. He had heard people speak of Jesus bringing healing and hope, forgiveness and compassion and that he spoke of religion in a new way. When Bartimaeus heard that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by him, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, show me mercy" (10:47)! But just as the words left his mouth, many scolded him, trying to shush him, but he wasn't deterred and shouted even louder, "Son of David, show me mercy" (10:48)! We're not told why the crowd, possibly including the disciples, silenced Bartimaeus. Maybe they thought he was being disrespectful? Or maybe they thought he was jumping the line or maybe they thought there wasn't enough mercy to go around, especially to the undeserving poor. Maybe they didn't want their special place with Jesus given to this hideous beggar?! Whatever the reason, it didn't stop Bartimaeus. Undeterred, Bartimaeus loudly

demands mercy. "Son of David, show me mercy!" And his volume and determination pay off. Jesus stops. He stops on the way to Jerusalem...on his way to the cross. Jesus stops and tells those same people who had just shushed Bartimaeus to call him forward, and they do. The crowd changes its tune, at Jesus' command. "Be encouraged!", they told Bartimaeus. "Get up!" they told him. "Hey, Jesus is calling you" (v. 49). And what did Bartimaeus do? He threw his coat to the side, jumped up and came to Jesus (v. 50). Jesus then asked Bartimaeus the same question he had asked James and John right before today's story. "What do you want me to do for you? Differing from James and John, Bartimaeus didn't ask for the best seat in Jesus' glory. Rather, he asked for mercy and to see again" (v. 51 (NRSV)). Jesus told him to "Go" that his faith had healed him. We're told that "at once," Bartimaeus could see. He was transformed and began to follow Jesus on "the way," which has double meaning for Mark...both the highway that led to Jerusalem and the way of suffering, which is the way of the cross.

A confession and a few observations because words matter and so does context. **The confession:** I'm often uncomfortable with stories of healing in the New Testament. "It's not that I don't distrust them, exactly. I don't doubt that Jesus healed or continues to heal. But I don't know quite what to do with the miracle stories. Should I read them as metaphors for spiritual healing and renewal? Should I take them literally, but only as unique 1st century proofs of Jesus' deity? Should I regard them as myths from a pre-scientific era? Or should I- as I was taught to do as a child- believe that miraculous healings continue to this

day, and that God's children have every right to pray for them, expect them, and proclaim them? I don't know. All I can say is that I sometimes struggle. I don't want to jump to metaphor too quickly, when it's clear that Jesus cared about the physical, embodied lives of everyone he met. But I also don't want to hold false hope for anyone"

(journeywithjesus.net, Debie Thomas). We sat as a group of chaplains in the conference room of the hospital as tears fell from my colleague's face. Richard shared the story of being at his mother's bedside in the hospital when he was 10 years old. His dad had brought Richard and his siblings to say goodbye to their mom, as the doctor had said she didn't have much longer. Richard told us that his family was in church every time the doors were open. His mother had more faith than anyone he knew, besides his grandmother and yet she was very sick and wasn't getting better. Out of desperation and maybe out of faith, too, he did what he was taught to do, and he crawled into the bed with his mom, and he prayed to God to heal her. He knew this biblical story along with several others that claim that faith could make one well. So he prayed that God would heal her from her cancer. Well, she died the very next day. Richard was devastated, and he was very angry at God for years for not answering his prayer. Even forty years later, Richard was still grieving and deeply troubled by these words which he took so seriously yet words for which he didn't fully know the context. As we sat around that conference table years ago, I felt the pain of my colleague because I've known it myself. He had interpreted this and other scripture passages that reinforced a misleading and challenging understanding of God that equates faith and healing.

Now a few Observations from this beautiful and layered story: 1)

This story is also in Matthew and Luke. Matthew has two unnamed blind men (20:29-34) and Luke has one unnamed blind man (18:35-43). There is no wordplay nor wonderful details that Mark provides, including Bartimaeus' name. Another detail is that Bartimaeus calls Jesus by the title of "Son of David." Besides Peter, Bartimaeus is the only human being to call Jesus this title in Mark's Gospel. This blind man sees who Jesus really is when others who've been with Jesus daily don't recognize or believe in his saving and healing power. Maybe Mark shares these healing stories to underline the contrast between outsiders who see Jesus and insiders who remain blind to his true identity (*FOW*)? "It is these- the least of society, so easily passed by and hindered by crowds pressing around Jesus- that shine as examples of faithfulness in Mark's Gospel" (*Connections*, Alicia D. Myers).

2) As always in Mark there is an obstacle to overcome in having faith- here the crowd gets in Bartimaeus' way. As also in Mark, words matter, as they could mean different things as does the placement of a story and its contrasts contribute to the meaning, hence context matters, too. I mentioned earlier that there are two healing stories of blind men in the middle section of Mark (8:22-26). Sandwiched between these two stories of healing blind men, Jesus gives three predictions of his crucifixion and resurrection. Here in the second story Jesus speaks and Bartimaeus immediately regains his sight (v. 52). Also, not since the calling of the Twelve and Levi early in Mark's Gospel has Jesus called anyone. And Bartimaeus is the only one in Mark who follows Jesus after

he is healed. Even though Jesus tells him to “go,” he stays. Here- after a bunch of stories where the disciples don’t get it- Bartimaeus gets everything right.

3) **Bartimaeus’ coat**- Mark adds in this curious detail as well. When one is a beggar on the streets, a coat is more than likely your most valuable possession. A coat is invaluable for providing some warmth in the cold elements. It also provides identity and security representing the little power Bartimaeus owns. The coat may also represent the “old life” which must be left behind in order to experience new life in Christ. Bartimaeus sheds his identity as a blind beggar and becomes a disciple. “In a section of Mark’s Gospel particularly invested in suggesting modes of discipleship, Bartimaeus appears as a radical disciple that casts away his only valuable belonging to follow Jesus. Whereas the miracle starts with Bartimaeus ‘sitting on the side of the road (v. 46), it ends with the new disciple ‘walking, following Jesus on the way’ (v. 52).

4) **Healing can also be wholeness or salvation, and it can come in many different forms: physical, emotional, spiritual, relational.** For example, Jesus heals the spiritual blindness of the crowd. Although Bartimaeus is “literally the blind man in this story, it’s the crowd that renders him unseen. To their seeing eyes, the blind man by the road is invisible, looks hideous, and therefore expendable” (Thomas). Healing can also come on the other side. While the translation (CEB) that I read said, “your faith has healed you,” other translations say, “your faith has made you well” or “your faith has saved you.” The Greek term Mark uses here means “saved,” hence the Gospel writer’s choice of wording has

implications for discipleship. Saving someone means transforming their social and physical circumstance just as much as it means changing their spiritual relationship with God. Once Bartimaeus was able to see, he began to follow Jesus on the way to suffering- to the cross and eventually to the empty tomb. Because of God's amazing grace he was blind but now he sees, lost but now is found.

Words matter and so does context. Maybe you find yourself on the side of the literal or proverbial road crying out, and you've become so accustomed to no one seeing you that you no longer imagine or believe that God will stop and listen or call God's people to bring you to him, much less transform your life and save you. At our deepest cries for mercy and even at our sometimes worn-out or half-hearted cries for mercy Jesus asks Bartimaeus to articulate his heart's desire, "What do you want me to do for you?" Isn't it obvious? "Yet, Jesus asks anyway. He doesn't assume. He doesn't reduce Bartimaeus to his blindness. Instead, he honors the fullness and complexity of a real human being who likely has many desires and needs" (Thomas). What would you say if Jesus asked this question of you? Let us, like Bartimaeus, "keep crying out to Jesus for our hope is in the expectation of God's mercy and saving grace- that is faith as is not allowing the crowds to deter us from asking for mercy as well as to see as we vulnerably put our longings into the air as loudly and insistently as we can. 'What do you want me to do for you?' In his compassion, Jesus will not stop asking. And in our need, I hope we will not stop telling him" (Thomas). Amen.