

“What do you want me to do?”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Mark 10:32-52
March 8, 2020 - Second Sunday in Lent

We find ourselves on the road with Jesus and the disciples, going up to Jerusalem, making our way to all that awaits there. Immediately after this passage, in chapter 11, Jesus will arrive at the city gate and make his triumphal entry. We'll skip that part and come back to it on Palm Sunday. But for now, let's listen for good news in this reading from the Gospel according to Mark:

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.”

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Son of David, Jesus, 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.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see.” Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he received sight and followed him on the way.

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

When I was in fifth and sixth grade I got to go on two winter weekend trips up to New York's Catskill Mountains. We'd ski on the bunny slopes, swim, ride horses, ice skate, play in the hotel's arcade, see magic and comedy shows in the theater, and participate in evening hotel activities like dance contests and games of bingo.

"We" were a group of Staten Island kids connected through our schools to a program for students who were blind or visually impaired. I was, by quite the margin, the student with the best vision. I have never been so good at ping pong as I was when I played against my friend Arnie. I crushed him. He didn't mind. He owned a dirt bike and he got in the newspaper once for his keen interest in motorcycles.

The twenty kids and the adult teachers and chaperones gathered on the first night of my sixth-grade trip shortly after checking in to our rooms. The teachers went over the rules for the weekend, several of which would end up being broken before dinner. (We were kids with disabilities, but we were still teenagers.) Then one of the teachers gave an impassioned plea for us to have fun and participate in all the activities at this sprawling ranch hotel. She pointed out that tonight there would be a limbo contest after supper, followed by a hotel-wide *Pictionary* tournament.

It was Lucy, a tenth-grader who was completely blind since birth and the biggest fan of rapper Vanilla Ice that I had ever met, who started giggling first. The laughter spread through the students as the cheerleading teacher looked on in confusion. She couldn't see what was so funny until MaryAnn, a girl with albinism I'd known since I was six, piped up: "We just don't think this group has much of a shot at winning *Pictionary*, ma'am. But we'll be there for the limbo contest."

There's an app on my phone called "Be My Eyes." I downloaded it sometime in 2018 after hearing about it on a podcast. There are more than 200,000 people around the world who are blind or visually impaired who use the app. When they need help seeing something — instructions on their frozen burrito, picking out the right color shirt before a date, or setting their washing machine to a special cycle — they ring up the app and one of the volunteers is connected to them via video conference to use their phone's camera to solve the issue.

This miracle of technology has one big problem. For the 200,000 folks seeking to borrow a pair of eyes, there are over 3.5 million volunteers ready to help. I've gone months without getting to see for someone! Thanks be to God.

Thanks be to God, for the world has not always been so accommodating and generous to people who are blind. Here we find Bartimaeus. That name literally just means "son of Timaeus" in Aramaic. Scholars point out that Mark's listeners might have heard two different allusions in that name: it plays to the Aramaic for "unclean" and to the Greek for "greatly prized" and if you're thinking, "Whoa, that's deep!" you won't get an argument from me.

Here we find this beggar who is blind sitting by the roadside and he hears that Jesus is near and he cries out for mercy. And he is told to be quiet. This is not the time to cry out for mercy, blind beggar.

Here we find this beggar who is blind sitting by the roadside crying out, and he is told to be quiet. He has cried out “Son of David” — the first time someone has used that particular name for Jesus in Mark’s gospel — and he has cried it out in Jericho. He’s used a messianic title for Jesus and he’s used it in the place where one of Israel’s great military victories took place. (Maybe you remember the people marching around the city and blowing the trumpets and the walls coming a’tumblin’ down.) You put “Son of David” with “Jericho” and you sound like a pot-stirrer who could get us all in trouble with the Romans.

But Jesus wants to meet this beggar who is blind and asking for mercy and identifying him with King David. Bartimeaus needs no help finding his way to Jesus and the question comes from the Son of David: “What do you want me to do for you?”

We just heard this question! Jesus had explained, for the third time, about how it was going to go down in Jerusalem. Here come James and John, in the ultimate case of not knowing how to read a room, asking, “Teacher, look that’s great, about the condemnation and the mocking and the spitting and the flogging and the death and the rising again, but could you promise to say yes to whatever we ask you next?”

“What do you want me to do for you?”

Jesus has been sketching a picture for them as they have walked. He has been adding details and shadows. He has drawn them in to an image of a Messiah who suffers and who has come not to be served, but to serve. He has written “first = last” over and over. He has shown them “servant” repeatedly.

And James and John — and Peter and the others before them — can’t solve this riddle. The Messiah can’t suffer and die. The Messiah will hand out cabinet positions. The Messiah will reward with prestige and privilege.¹ The Messiah will do what the powerful do, except with the backing of God.

He explains it again. That this path, this community, this reign of God will not look like Caesar’s, not like David’s, not like anything before or since. It will be about the project of servanthood and least-finding and outcast-bringing-in.

What do you want me to do for you?

Bartimeaus is able to see. He is no longer pushed to the edge of town. He is no longer a beggar. He has been brought in from the outside and what does he do with this newfound sight, this newfound legitimacy, this newfound life? He follows Jesus “on the way.” We know that “the Way” was what the early Church called Christianity. The hearers of Mark’s gospel see this unclean/prized man receive what he asked for and use what he has been given to go toward Jerusalem with the Messiah.

¹ N. Clayton Croy at https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2583

When I was in sixth grade, I would have asked Jesus to make me see perfectly and to immediately get me away from the social outcasts with whom I was limboing and playing ping pong. I like to think that I've matured, and that today I would simply ask for 20/20 vision, but for none of my experiences related to disability to have changed.

But I must admit that, taken a bit more metaphorically, asking to see is a bit overwhelming.

If I see, I know that Alabama put a man to death this past week.

If I see, I know that while I'm feverishly washing my hands, children are still being held at the border.

If I see, I must become a servant.

If I see, if I see, if I see...

If I see, I might lose my nerve on this path to Jerusalem.

It's tempting to look out for my own hide and try to secure a position of comfort and safety, maybe at the left hand, maybe at the right.

What do you want me to do for you?

Show me the way, Son of David.

Amen.