

A little piece on *Buzzfeed.com* suggests that kids shouldn't believe everything their parents tell them. For instance, one father told his daughter that people get to speak only 10,000 words a month. Anytime she was especially talkative her father would caution her, “Careful now. You're over 9,000 already.” Another father told his kids that pears were apples from outer space. Creative parenting, don't you think?

Bartimaeus, however, must have believed everything that his parents told him about the promised Messiah, *the Son of David*. Bartimaeus took his place in the ancient town of Jericho as Jesus passed through. We can all envision what happened to him. Jericho is downhill from Jerusalem and roughly fifteen miles to the northeast. Like all ancient Judean towns, Jericho is a bland color. There are few palm trees, some irrigation and cultivated land around, but the town itself and all the hills around are several shades of brown. Everything is dusty, and Bartimaeus sat in that dust beside the road when Jesus passes by.

Bartimaeus came here every day. He knew every step by heart. He had to because he's blind. He had no hope except the charity of others. He had no value to society, nothing he could do to earn even a slice of a living. In a way it cost the community to keep him alive. He had heard of Jesus, just as people today have heard of Jesus. The word was he's a great teacher who heals people, and he might be the next person God designates as king. He didn't know that for sure, but today Jesus is coming through the town where Bartimaeus lives.

No newspapers or television reporters were around to announce Jesus' itinerary. He just shows up one spring day, ready to start the uphill path. He travels with a caravan of pilgrims going to Passover in Jerusalem. He bumps and elbows his way through Jericho's crowds, continuing on his way to Jerusalem no matter the noise around him. Like other rabbis he teaches while he walks and answers questions or poses situations for people to consider. His teachings are strange indeed, as he tells esoteric, mystifying parables instead of more simple teaching. He's leaving town. He was probably met and accompanied by the mayor and the city council. They would have given him the key to the city if he wanted to have it.

Bartimaeus is in his daily humiliating smudge as Jericho's Pig-pen, like Charlie Brown's dusty little friend, as the crowd goes yelping and jostling along. He catches snippets of their conversations and determines that Jesus is coming his way. He didn't know this morning when he tapped and felt his way to his old spot by the road that Jesus would be so near. Every minute of every day is spent asking for pity and thrashing about in his mind for something to do to lift himself out of this darkness, to get him off the town's charity rolls and into the human community as a whole person. Without a thought about the others around or what anyone might think, he takes his chance. No half measures. He shouts at the top of his lungs, “*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*”

The crowd, maybe a thousand people or so shuffling by all at once, drowns him out. He yells again with every ounce of strength he can push from his lungs, “*Son of David, have mercy on me!*” As he experienced so many times before, the people around him disregard any need he has. There's an important religious man leaving town. Everyone is excited about what he might do in Jerusalem, maybe return Israel to its nationhood and boot the Romans out. “You there, quiet down! Shut up or I'll bop you one,” someone shouts in the direction of Bartimaeus.

One chance in an entire lifetime to be healed. No matter the humiliation that's drifted down year by year like another layer of dust, the blind beggar reaches up through any impediment in his way. "*Jesus! Jesus!*" So undecorous; so improper; so unpresbyterian! Bartimaeus is creating an uproar. He's screaming for mercy. Who is he to receive mercy from anyone? He's worthless, a leech on society. Life would be better for everyone in town if they didn't have to pass by his irritating requests every day. Over thirty heads in front of him, Jesus turns and looks his way. Despite the noise of hundreds of people whooping it up and sending Jesus on to fight their fight, set them free, and bring back the booty, Jesus stops. Jesus halts the spontaneous parade, cocks his ear, and peers over heads and shoulders to see Bartimaeus in the dust.

This is God's way of looking at us. He has a strong gaze that separates the person from the crowd. Jesus sends this surprising message: "*Call him here.*" Jesus is summoning Bartimaeus, so the crowd parts and sends him to the Lord. "*On your feet! He's calling you.*" The blind man tosses off his cloak, springs up, and goes to Jesus, the hands of those around pushing him in the rabbi's direction. Not a lot of chitchat on Jesus' part. Bartimaeus already has his attention. He says to the beggar, "*What do you want me to do for you?*" Like there's any question about it? Isn't it too obvious? He stumbled forward to him, eyes white as two snake eggs. What does he really want? What would place him in the middle of a dignified human life again? Only Jesus can know the full measure of his answer when he says, "*Rabbi, I want to see.*"

Only Jesus can know that he's asking not just for physical sight but to be a real person, as everyone is created to be. It's what he summoned the faith to pray for...even made some promises to God of what he'd do if he could finally see. Jesus barely pauses. Bartimaeus looks in his direction, sightless, and the first words he hears while for the first time he can truly see are: "*Go, your faith has healed you.*" It's done.

In an instant Bartimaeus sees this man in front of him. The sun hurts his newly functioning eyes, everything is blurry, but he sees. Life is fulfilled for him even if he were to die the very next day. He has not only found God. God has found him. His life matters. He means something to God. And now God means everything to him because of Jesus the Son of David.

The gospel of Mark records: "*Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.*" Each of us have been Bartimaeus (or enough of him) to understand what God has done for us. Bartimaeus immediately followed Jesus. Will we go with Jesus too?

We have been asking each Sunday morning, "Who is Jesus Christ?" The answer Bartimaeus gives is that "He is the Son of David." That title for Jesus doesn't have the same meaning and punch for us as it did for people in Jesus' day when the mere mention of the name "David" brought a flood of hope. David represented the golden era of Israel's glory days. David stood for all that had come before the dark times, the time of exile, the times of living under one foreign oppressor after another. So invoking the title, "*the Son of David,*" was an ingenious move on the part of Bartimaeus the blind beggar. The phrase would instill joy in all who would hear it. So maybe it is no coincidence that we hear Jesus identified this way by a man who badly needed true hope and an infusion of healing...a man whose life was a string of miseries.

As "*the Son of David,*" Jesus brought hope and healing to marginalized folks who needed it most. Mark passes on to us the name of a poor beggar whom Jesus healed to impress on us that we who continue

Christ's compassionate work today must go to the poor, the disenfranchised, the powerless, and the nearly invisible to offer them healing and hope in Jesus Christ.

Christ, who is the Son of David, is the incarnation of hope, the dream of deliverance, and the embodiment of joy—for all who need these precious gifts the most. Yet so often we in the church seem content to keep that hope to ourselves, not allowing the overflow of hope's abundance to leak through the walls of the sanctuary and into the streets—where so very many nearly invisible people cry out for the “Son of David,” and for all the hope and joy that name can bring.

One long hot summer in a place called St. Johns, there came into town a man with a big tent which he set up at the corner of Lombard and Clarendon, with a sign posted in front: THE GREAT MARCEL AND HIS FABULOUS SNAKE SHOW. He was dapper and slim, and he wore a stovepipe hat and a cutaway coat. And when the crowds thronged around the tent that night and oil torches flickered their light over a slender young lady dancing with snakes, Marcel told of his wonderful oil—oil extracted from snakes that cured every human ill. He promised it would cure corns, calluses, lumbago, colds, indigestion, and was especially potent in dealing with certain *private* diseases. Best of all, it was only a dollar a bottle. Everybody agreed it was worth a try, and for years afterwards nobody could open a drugstore in St. Johns, because Marcel's Snake Oil was good for everything, and everybody had plenty of it (From *Success Cybernetics*, by U.S. Andersen, West Nyack: Parker Publishing Co. 1966).

There have always been healers. Some have gotten rich exploiting the pain of desperate folks with nowhere else to turn. Maybe that is why when Jesus healed people he often told them to tell no one. He did not want to be called “healer” anyway, but rather “teacher.” He did not come to exploit, but to explain the Way to life. In fact, John's gospel quotes him as saying “*I am the Way...*” And as we heard him explain to his disciples last week, his way was the way of the Cross. I'm sure at this point not all of the twelve were on board with that. But still, his way, his compassion for people would not let him ignore those who were constantly pleading for help. Bartimaeus was immeasurably blessed that Jesus heard his cry.

Today Jesus asks each of us the same question he asked Bartimaeus: “*What do you want me to do for you?*” What answer will we give to his question? Deliverance from an unhealthy relationship? A cure for a destructive addiction? Major help with our sagging sense of self-worth? The question sounds almost too good to be true. Imagine what it sounded like to a blind beggar from Jericho! It sounds somewhat like the child's game we used to play as kids: If you could have three wishes, what would you wish for?

Bartimaeus was blessed. He got his wish. The NIV records, “*Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road*” (v. 52). The NRSV has the literal translation of that little three letter Greek word that I mentioned last Sunday: “*Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.*”

That is to say, his wish became the Way—the Way of Jesus. Amen.