

A Simple Question
A Sermon on Mark 10:46-52 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ October 28, 2018

You have probably seen a headline like this one in my newspaper: *Thousands Continue in Trek, Numbers Grow as Multitude Inches North*. God gave us these powerful minds, so it is our responsibility is to interrogate the story. Our first responsibility is to ask some simple questions.

Why are these people traveling from Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua in hope of making it to the southern border of the United States? What is the situation in these countries? Why have they chosen to travel together in a caravan? If their goal was to sneak into the United States illegally, why would they intentionally publicize their journey? Has this sort of caravan ever happened before? How many people attempt to cross the border legally each year? How many people attempt to cross the border illegally each year? How many people die while trying to cross the border?

Our first responsibility is to ask some simple questions. If you read a newspaper today the headline probably reads: 11 People Killed in Synagogue Shooting. We pray for the families of the victims and for our nation. But we also need to ask some simple questions? How many people die in the United States every day from gun violence? Does this sort of violence happen in other countries? God gave us these powerful minds, so our first responsibility is to interrogate the story.

You might have some questions about the story of blind Bartimaeus we heard a few minutes ago. I have four types of questions about our Gospel passage.

We have some questions about the place. The story happens in Jericho. Is this place important? Jericho is one of the oldest cities in the world, more than 10,000 years old. At the time of the story several thousand people lived there. It is an important city because it has reliable springs of drinking water. This is essential in a region that receives only 8 inches of rain each year. Most relevant for our story, Jericho is about 16 miles west of Jerusalem.

Jesus and his disciples have been traveling through the region and are approaching Jerusalem. In fact, the very next story in the Gospel of Mark is the story of Palm Sunday, when Jesus enters Jerusalem riding on a colt.

Is the place important? Yes, but even more important is that, as usual, Jesus is on the move. Jesus did not stay in his hometown. It is especially relevant for us at St. Paul's that Jesus did not avoid the bad neighborhoods, the cities and towns and rural areas where the foreigners or the poor people lived. Jesus didn't stay in his comfort zone. He journeyed all over the country

God created us in the image of God, so our first responsibility to interrogate the story. We have some questions about the crowd of people following Jesus. What is in their minds when they order Bartimaeus to be quiet? What is their attitude toward people with disabilities?

If we look at the clues in the New Testament and Hebrew Scriptures it seems many people assumed blindness and other physical impairments were some sort of divine punishment. People with physical impairments were usually forbidden from serving in the Temple. In a time when most people were poor and when most of the work was manual labor, people with disabilities were given very little respect.

In many places discrimination against people who are poor and people with disabilities continues today. This is one of the reasons 21st century followers of Jesus are passionate about following his example to fully include all members of the community. This isn't a matter of being nice. It is a matter of being faithful.

There seems to be a sudden change of mood in the crowd when Jesus responds to Bartimaeus' cries. What is behind this? What is going on in the hearts of the people in the crowd? We can only

guess, but when I hear the people say, *Take heart; get up, he is calling you* it seems that the people have dramatically and quickly changed their approach to Bartimaeus. It is almost as if they had wanted to show compassion to him before but were afraid to do so. It is almost as if Jesus has given them permission to put compassion first, to put compassion ahead of the rules they have been following.

Being faithful is not just a matter of what is in our hearts. Faithfulness is about what we do and what we say, so our first responsibility is to interrogate the story.

Let's ask some simple questions about Bartimaeus. When Bartimaeus says, 'let me see again' this implies that his blindness was not lifelong. How long has he been blind?

We have more questions about Bartimaeus. *The disciples sternly ordered Bartimaeus to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"* How long has Bartimaeus been asking for someone to help him? How has he been treated by other people? Bartimaeus is a powerful example of faith. His faith is demonstrated in the fact that he is honest about his weakness and does not give up even though he catches all kinds of flak from the people around him. Bartimaeus is both humble and persistent. These are characteristics of faith I see in you.

The end of the story brings another set of questions. After *Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well."* *Bartimaeus regained his sight and followed him on the way.* Does Bartimaeus become one of Jesus' disciples? What does he do with the rest of his life? The end of the story makes me think back to a few weeks ago when we heard about the encounter between Jesus and a young rich man. The man in that story begins his encounter with Jesus in much the same way as Bartimaeus; he is eager and enthusiastic as he tells Jesus that he has followed all of the commandments. But in that story the rich man does not follow Jesus, instead he goes away shocked and grieving. The pattern of reversal is powerful; in their encounters with God, those who feel strong and proud are often disappointed. Those who are fully aware of their weaknesses and limitations are renewed or transformed by their encounter with divine love.

Faithfulness is about letting ourselves be changed by grace as we engage with people in diverse situations. *As Jesus and his disciples were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, 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 stopped walking. Jesus stopped the crowd. *Then Jesus said to Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?"*

Why does Jesus ask this question? Isn't it obvious what the man wants? The question is so simple, so open-ended. We aren't always good at asking questions. When we ask questions we have a way of asking questions that is often another way of arguing. Our questions are often more like, "Why can't you see my side of the argument?" Perhaps we should spend more of our time asking the simple questions. We could ask ourselves, "What do we want?"

Jesus asked Bartimaeus a simple question and he *said to Jesus, "My teacher, let me see again."* *Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well."* What does Jesus mean when he says, 'your faith has made you well'? Perhaps we should make the question even more simple. What is faith?

Faith is moving out of our comfort zone to encounter people who are different from us. Faith is compassion. Faith is fully including those who have been excluded. Faith is in our actions. Faith is being persistent while having humility about our limitations. Faith is letting ourselves be changed. Faith is asking a simple question.