What Do You Want Me to Do for You?

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson.
Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,
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Text: Mark 10:46-52

I am fond of this story of blind Bartimaeus. I love the detail in the story that the other bystanders tried to get Bartimaeus\(^1\) to be quiet and not make a spectacle when Jesus passed. I love the way the blind man leaped up and ran to Jesus when he heard Jesus wanted to meet him. I love the story because it always makes me wonder, what would it take to get Jesus to stop and listen to me, to us? Today, I am drawn to the question Jesus asked the beggar: “What do you want me to do for you?”

It is such an obvious question, yet the answer is not so obvious. Bartimaeus could have merely wanted a contribution to his begging bowl. He might have wanted Jesus hold his hand and say how sorry he was for him. But Bartimaeus asked for the moon: “I want to see.” Yes, Jesus found Bartimaeus in a ditch begging. I’m told Oscar Wilde once said, “Being in the gutter is not all we have; some of us are looking at the stars.”\(^2\) Bartimaeus sought more and when Jesus helped him, he became his disciple.

In my thirty plus years in the ministry I have known many who come to the parson asking for help, often with very good, tug-at-the-heart stories. Sometimes the beggars are hungry but, of course, at other times they have hidden plans if you give money. How does the parson know the true from the false? One way is to ask a few questions and get to know the person. I’m sure I’ve been fooled by a few in my time but Jesus’ question, direct and to the point—*What do you want me to do for you?*—is the obvious one to ask. How it is answered varies. I’m sure Jesus also met many people like Bartimaeus during his years as a religious teacher. Bartimaeus was different, however. He wanted out of his ditch near Jericho; he wanted to see again.

When the story concludes we learn, “Immediately [Bartimaeus] regained his sight and followed [Jesus] on the way.”\(^3\) This means, he joined the pilgrims on the way to Jerusalem for the feast, to give thanks to God for his sight. But ‘follow’ is a loaded word in the New Testament. Probably it meant Bartimaeus became a disciple of Jesus.

Of course, this story—like all the stories of the Bible—is not just about one blind man whom Jesus helped. Mark included it because it had a message for the church of his time, and presumably for us as well. What if this story is also addressed to a begging church stuck in the

\(^1\) William Lane thought because the beggar’s name is mentioned by Mark—it is not by Luke and Matthew in their accounts of the same story—that Bartimaeus must have been known in the early churches associated with John Mark. See Lane, Wm., *The Gospel According to Mark*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 387.

\(^2\) Quoted in Lamin Sanneh’s *Summoned from the Margin: Homecoming of an African*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 92.

\(^3\) Mark 10:52b.
ditch? The church calls out to Jesus, too, just like Bartimaeus. Son of David, help us! Suppose he stopped and called us to join him, but first he asked, what do you want me to do for you?

- “Can you help our church become a place where people who seek purpose for their lives find it by finding faith in the living God?”
- “Can you help our church do the best job teaching faith to our children and be a place where young parents find direction for their marriage and families?”
- “Can you help our church become a gathering for vital, exciting worship? With great music, preaching, and prayer?”
- “Can our church be the kind of place where people hear the call to love you and love neighbors, with genuine outreach to people’s souls and people’s physical needs?”
- “Can you help our church become a place where peoples’ lives are changed?”
- “Jesus, can you help our church discover the joy we seek?”

What if each of us said to Jesus, “I want to become your followers through your church.” I wonder what he would say? Note the ending of the story in Mark. Bartimaeus “recovered his sight and followed Jesus.”

We tend to compare the church today with the church of fifty years ago. We probably want the same kind of church our parents did. What was their secret? I suspect they prayed about it to Jesus as clearly as Bartimaeus did with his petition. Then they set about building and being that kind of church. They followed Jesus. We know this takes commitment, work, and resources to be this kind of church. Ah, but resources….

We know there are complaints that this church seems to beg for money too much. A few weeks ago during one of Ms Reynolds’ sermons the lights in the church suddenly started dimming and in a moment only the two candles on the communion table provided light. There was an awkward moment in the darkness, perhaps presaging what we would all experience the week after Sandy blew through. Someone realized a child had accidently hit the switch outside the door here. She went out and hit the on switch and soon the lights came back. After the service that morning we had a new members class. One of the new folks speaking about the dark said, “After the lights went out, I figured, well, I guess the church does need money!”

Is money too much emphasized by the church? Well, each dollar helps the church buy materials for the church school, music for the choir, light and heat when hurricanes strike, pay the office staff to assist the ministers, help our neighbors who come to Bethel Love for food. And, of course, each dollar affords the church the ability to pay the salaries of our ministers. Let’s rephrase Jesus question to Bartimaeus. To us Jesus might be asking: what do you want money for? It is a fair question. For ministry: music, teaching, mission, worship, hospitality.

We want to follow Jesus. As a church, it takes resources. Think about this question and your answer, our answer, this week before you bring your pledge for consecration next Sunday.

End

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4 Mark 10:52.