

YearB-Pentecost23-2018-Propser25b-The Sons of Thunder meet Blind Bartimaeus

October 28th, 2018

Thomas L. Truby

Mark 10:35-52

The Sons of Thunder and Blind Bartimaeus Reveal Themselves in Their Dialogue with Jesus

The Gospel text for last Sunday, taken from Mark 10:35-45, present us with the ten verses just before today's text. In each reading, this weeks and last, Jesus responds to his petitioners with "What is it you want me to do for you?" using those exact words in each case. A blind beggar sitting by the road, whose name is Bartimaeus son of Timaueus, defying those around him yells out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." "James and John, the sons of Zebedee (otherwise known as the Sons of Thunder, ambitious brothers with the hope of rising through the ranks) came forward to him and said, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' The sheer audacity of their request has always astounded me.

So the latter two come with a naked quest for power and the former asks for mercy. When Jesus asks the brothers what they want, they answer "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." They are not talking about Heaven as we often think of it, they are talking about when Jesus becomes the new Jewish King. We instantly see they are seeking their own advancement and don't care at all about the other disciples. They want to form an alliance with Jesus assuring they will be the two highest ranking officials under him. They reveal themselves in what they want from Jesus.

Jesus tells them they don't know what they are asking for. They reply "whatever you have in mind Jesus, we are able." These two young men filled with confidence in their own strength don't know what they are talking about. They are blind to their private ambition and out of touch with their need for mercy. Don't these two brothers realize all the disciples want to sit at Jesus' right and left when he sits in his glory? Sure enough, "When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John."

So how do we avoid our universal desire to be number one? For me the first step is to acknowledge my own rivalry, to monitor myself expecting to find it and when I do, to manage it as best I can and then, even better, to trust God by letting it go to God in a prayer for forgiveness. To be in rivalry is our "original sin" and as Paul said, "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God". When the other disciples discover James and John had gone behind their back to talk to Jesus privately the whole community tensed up and began looking at each other with suspicion and distrust.

Jesus sees the developing problem and calls his disciples together. His answer could not be more contemporary. "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 slaves of all.”

James and John reveal who they serve when they request positions of extreme importance in Jesus’ kingdom. They serve themselves and want to be served by others. We hope they gradually change as the meaning of the life, death and resurrection gradually dawn on them in the weeks and years ahead as they continue together “on the Way”.

We have almost forgotten Blind Bartimaeus in our focus on James and John. Bartimaeus has stationed himself on the road to Jerusalem as it leaves Jericho. Jesus is heading toward Jerusalem and the end of his journey on earth. When the blind beggar “heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout and say, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’” Quite a different request than we want you to do whatever we ask. And he makes his request in public view and not secretly. Everything here is in the open, fully transparent and coming from a place of powerlessness and vulnerability. In fact, those standing around the beggar sternly order him to be quiet. He was embarrassing them and breaking the rules for blind beggars. How were the people of Jericho going to impress Jesus if people like this were trying to draw attention to themselves? These are the kinds of people you want hidden from public view.

He wouldn’t be quiet! Defying them he kept shouting and asking for mercy. Blind beggars were blind because they were receiving God’s judgment. They deserved to be blind. They didn’t deserve mercy or so people thought. Either they or their parents had been sinners and that’s why those around him treated him with contempt. God himself was the reason they were badly treated. If God could be like that so could they. Actually blind and handicapped people were the culture’s scapegoats, the weak ones upon whom culture poured its’ own relational poison.

As the procession came near the shouting beggar, Jesus stood still. He stopped traffic, making them all wait as he responded to the blind man. Beggars are to be ignored not stopped for! His refusal to move matched the blind beggar’s refusal to shut up. Now the people were scandalized and annoyed by both the blind beggar and Jesus. “Call him here,” Jesus commanded, with a voice as stern as those who tried to shush the beggar.

“And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” I sense an annoyance in the way they still feel entitled to tell him what to do. They want to make sure he feels lesser than they. People communicate where they think the other rank in a thousand small ways. If we take the “shusher’s” view rather than God’s view as shown in Jesus, it’s very difficult to rise above our socially assigned station in life.

But the blind beggar is effervescent and irrepressible. Already he feels the difference having an advocate makes. “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?'" There's the self-revealing question again. "What do you want me to do for you?" Remember James and John's answer was "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." How will the blind man reply by contrast?

He begins, "My teacher," not just teacher but "my" teacher. This is personal and relational. He feels close to Jesus. He believes his teacher has something to teach him. He knows he is not a self-made, self-contained and self-actualized reservoir of individuality. He acknowledges his dependency, his need for Jesus and the warmth and respect he feels coming from Jesus. Our hearts soften as we hear them talk to each other.

"My teacher, let me see again." A simple expression of a simple wish. He wants to be made whole, to see in living color and see his teacher's face. His request is not referenced to any other human being. He doesn't want to be better than anyone else, even other people who are blind. He asks not to be served, only made whole.

"Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.'" Go! Rejoin your life. Your action in breaking social norms and calling for mercy has made you well. In every way Jesus affirms him, even crediting the blind man's faith for his healing. The culture, signified by the crowd, saw him as a bottom dweller, a loser, and did everything they could to keep him there. They were blind to his value as a co-human with them. But Jesus stopped and called him forward, heard his request and did just as he asked. "Immediately he regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way."

With Blind Bartimaeus and the old Methodist hymn we say, "Open our Eyes, Dear Jesus, Open our Eyes." Amen.