



**What Do You Want?** 10/25/09

Pentecost 21, b

Mark 10:46-52

**University Christian Church – Austin**

**C. Kutz-Marks preaching**

12 days ago the Austin American Statesman had an editorial on the issue the Austin City Council is wrestling with, whether to extend the 7a-7p ban on panhandling in much of downtown Austin, to a 24hr. Ban.<sup>1</sup> While public support for the expanded ban seems wide, including the leadership at our fellow Micah 6 congregation, University Baptist Church who have a considerable number of panhandlers on their front stoop, it is interesting that the Downtown Cluster of Congregations and Social Service Agencies does NOT support the suggested expanding of the current ordinance. Our city is struggling through another tough decision on how deal with homeless poor citizens in way that is both truly compassionate to those in need and at the same time considerate of other citizens who are sometimes harassed by the needy. In our scripture passage today implies that Jesus might weigh in on the side of the poorest, the neediest, though determining what the truly loving thing to do in our time – at least- is not as simple as it sounds.

You may remember that two weeks ago in our scripture lesson – earlier in this very chapter- Jesus challenged a rich, young ruler to sell off his possessions, to give the money to the poor and then to follow Jesus in his ministry. He couldn't. The rich young ruler had too much by way of riches in his life. When forced to decide between his riches here on earth and the promise of heavenly riches in following Christ, he somberly chose the former. His riches became his own embalming fluid, keeping him looking

good on the outside, but barely masking the reality of the spiritual death he had chosen.

This morning's passage takes us to the other end of the socio-economic status scale in ancient Israel and shows us what Divine love – manifested in the actions Jesus can do to help heal those bold enough to take a risk for God.

And a second reversal in today's passage presents- again, in this very same chapter of Mark - is the way in which Bartimaeus answered Jesus' question “What do you want me to do for you?” For just 10 verses earlier in the Gospel of Mark the very same question is asked by Jesus. On that occasion Jesus addressed His disciples James and John, the sons of Zebedee. Their answer: “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left in your glory.”

Jesus had no patience with that petty status grubbing. Jesus rebuked James and John when their request was so blatantly, how shall we put it, self-serving. But apparently Jesus appreciated Bartimaeus' request. Apparently Jesus found the request to be able to see...one worthy of granting.

Let us look at the life of Bartimaeus. The first thing we note is that he doesn't even have his own name. “Bar” means “son of” and Timaeus is his father's name. If we assume that Timaeus comes Aramaic origins, the common language of the people of Palestine at time, Timaeus means something like “son of the impure one.” That understanding would fit nicely into theological bias of those days that if someone was suffering a disease or a tragedy that that was God's punishment on someone's sin: the individual, an ancestor, even a neighbor. Remember in the second chapter of the Gospel of John Jesus' own brand new disciples did not yet understand the lack of relation between misfortune on the one hand and the God's will on the other. When they asked ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Rather than give them a lecture on how God allows a random assortment of blessing and trial<sup>ii</sup> into all

lives, he grounds the disciples in that moment, when he says ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.’ And as this morning's story unfolds, the very same could be said, once again.

Even in our world many will look upon the homeless, the destitute and broadly assume that they stand on the street corner begging because of some sinful habit or some laziness that makes them unable to fit in with our grand societal game plan. There's something wrong with them and, ultimately, it is their own fault. This kind of judgment makes it so much easier to ignore the cries of the needy if you can believe in your heart that they don't really need your help or don't really deserve your help, because when you get down to brass tacks they are the source of their own problem. We can walk right passed them on the sidewalk with our gaze fixed forward, or avoid making eye contact with them on the street corner while we impatiently wait in our cars at the red traffic light....saying to ourselves and to that nagging voice within “it's their personal responsibility” (wash hands) and then move right on by them confident that we are surely not responsible to help.

But that is not how Jesus responded to the poor, the physically disabled. We find in our passage a clear and typical example in how Jesus responded to blind Bartimaeus..

Bartimaeus was out on the road where those traveling back and forth between Jerusalem and Jericho would pass. This road some miles out from Jericho was a notorious haunt of bandits, so one imagines Bartimaeus would get alms from those who sympathized with his blind fate, but he'd also get alms from those facing their own mortality on that dangerous road who might give him a handout just to demonstrate to God how compassionate he was.... just to get in just a little better with God.

And people near Bartimaeus would be talking would be talking about what this Jesus of Nazareth had been doing and saying while in their Jericho. “Did you hear? He

healed old Eleazer of that skin disease!”

“That Jesus said that God desires to rule on earth and to bless us all with a new life we can barely imagine!”

Even without the gift of sight, a poor, blind man has learned to imagine a lot, but has not ever had much of the luxury of hope.... hope that life could be better! Why, even if he couldn't see it with his own dead eyes, Bartimaeus had heard plenty and wondrous news of Jesus' power! And that news had allowed him to venture a little bit of hope...because he'd heard that Jesus had healed all kinds of people.

Now the scripture is clear that there was an enormous crowd around Jesus as he made his way out of Jericho. Yet through the tumult Jesus was able to hear the cry of a desperate Bartimaeus above the roar yelling, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Jesus heard him – even in the tumult and for reasons that aren't explained, Jesus said, “Call him.”

Now, you have to pay attention carefully to what transpires in the next few moments, because it is essential. The crowd encouraged Bartimaeus “Take heart, get up, he is calling you.”

Bartimaeus as a blind beggar would have had his outer cloak, his mantle as the scriptures sometimes call it, draped across his lap to collect whatever coins that would be tossed his way. That mantle served multiple purposes. That mantle was his begging cup, or as they look on South Congress, his open guitar case.

As one unable to earn a living, so almost surely homeless, that mantle was the closest thing Bartimaeus would have had to a sleeping bag, to a blanket, and to a tent. The mantle is what he lived in. That mantle was his home.

So read carefully what the scripture says here, “And throwing off his cloak (which

a blind man would not likely be able to find again), he sprang up and came to Jesus.”

Do you see the enormous faith that he expresses? If life is a gamble, Bartimaeus is all in! Giving up that mantle is a sign that unlike the rich, young ruler, Bartimaeus is betting everything on a future that runs right through Jesus.

And that's what Jesus wanted from and for all those he encountered, the rich, the poor, sick, the well, the high status, the peasant in the field, the abled and the disabled all equally necessary to God's kingdom, all equally invited into God's Kingdom. Jesus wanted them to trust Him in walking in His Way, God's Way, the Way of trusting in a vision of what can be,

rather than being limited by the way it has always been.

the Way of open fellowship with all people of every race & sex & social status;

the way of compassion towards all people, friend or stranger, alike;

the way of building and incarnating this vision together as a community, as co-creators with God of that very world that God has envisioned from time immemorial.

And notice again what Jesus asked of Bartimaeus, “What do you want me to do for you?”

“Master, let me see again.”

That's where our reading by Abe stopped this morning, but even if you had never heard the story of Blind Bartimaeus, you could fairly well guess part of what is coming next!

Jesus didn't say, “go sell your possessions and follow me” to Bartimaeus, because Bartimaeus had already thrown his single valuable worldly possession to the wind precisely to trust Jesus for his healing.

Jesus didn't chastise him for being self-serving in his request for sight, like he did chastise James and John.

Jesus didn't even say that he would heal Bartimaeus. What he said was, “Go your way, your faith –

- your trust in me and the God who sent me-
- your readiness to leave your old way of life and embrace the new life that God is offering,
- “Your faith.... has made you well.”

Your faith has made you complete, whole, renewed. Your faith has made you into what God has desired you to become all along.

And Oh, by the way, you can also see through your once dead eyes as a part of this new life makeover.

The conclusion of the story reads, “And immediately he received his sight and followed him [Jesus] on the way.” Amazing grace!

I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.”

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As is always true in the Bible, however, the story isn't complete until we have run our own lives through the sieve of this story, this life lesson, that God has provided us in order to grow our faith.

We can, for example, learn a lot by allowing Jesus to ask us, “what do you want me to do for you?” What do you really, deeply, finally, most importantly want from Christ?

Don't be afraid to be honest with God. Blurt it out in your prayer or in your spiritual journal. If what you really want is a cushy job; or good health for you and your family; or loads of money, go ahead and pray for it. Be honest because it is in being honest with God that we, ourselves, will often discover that our yearnings have been too

petty, like James' and John's wanting to secure who'll sit where in heaven. That recognition is the beginning of our hunger for a more appropriate and more satisfying path forward.

But clearly, the great witness here is how that sunburned and homeless face with the cardboard sign at 15<sup>th</sup> and Interstate 35- might well be closer to God's Kingdom than you or me. What do you think we can, what do you think we should, do about this?

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i [http://www.statesman.com/search/content/editorial/stories/2009/10/13/1013panhandling\\_edit.html](http://www.statesman.com/search/content/editorial/stories/2009/10/13/1013panhandling_edit.html)

ii Matt. 5:45 God allows the “sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”