

What Do You Want Me to Do for You?

This morning's text picks up right where we left off last week. The rich man has gone away sad and the disciples, through the voice of Peter have wondered aloud what it means to have given up everything to follow Jesus. Our text for the morning takes us right up to the cusp of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and the beginning of Holy Week. The cross is not far off. [Mark 10:32-45]

Oh, those Zebedee boys. "Bless their hearts," we might say back home. On the heels of Jesus' telling the disciples for a third time where exactly this road is leading, these two have a request for Jesus. But first, they preface it. It almost sounds like me trying to persuade my parents to hear me out on some scheme teenage me had come up with. It's almost like saying, "Don't say 'no' right away. Hear me out." And in response—exhibiting an immense amount of patience—Jesus asks them, "What do you want me to do for you?" And they ask for power positions in the kingdom. Sigh. Jesus has just told them for the third time that he is about to be handed over, condemned, ridiculed, spat upon, tortured, and killed. Yes, he mentions the being raised part, too, but it does not really sound like something anyone asks to be a part of, does it? Let alone as Jesus' left and right-hand men? To give James and John the benefit of the doubt, they may not be completely smitten by the notion of worldly power. Maybe they are not in denial about the trials that lie ahead. Maybe they are all in with who Jesus is and what he is about. They may be eager for the battle, so to speak, wanting to stick with Jesus in the days ahead, even "volunteering to share those dangers with Jesus."¹ Regardless of their intent, Jesus assures the sons of Zebedee that they have no idea what they are asking. They will in fact have a share in his cup and his baptism, but the spots on his right and his left will be taken by others, presumably by the two criminals flanking him on neighboring crosses in a matter of days.

The other disciples are angry—indignant in some translations when they get wind of James and John's request, so Jesus draws them all close and explains once again what this mission is about. He has not come to

¹ Smart, James D. "Mark 10:35-45." *Interpretation* 33.3 (1979): 288-293. *ATLASerials, Religion Collection*. Web. 25 Jan. 2012, p. 290, as cited by Kathryn Johnston in her paper for the Well, 2012.

gain glory or even renown for himself or for a select few. He has come to turn the world's notion of power on its head and to give himself up to free others for a life beyond anyone's imagining. [Read Mark 10: 46-52]

So the journey takes them to Jericho next. Nothing of note happens while they're there apparently, or nothing Mark feels the need to tell us about, but the mere mention of Jericho would have mattered to Mark's first hearers. In the thick of discussions of serving and being served, of power and pecking order, Jericho would make sense, because Jericho is all about power and prestige. Herod the Great had a winter palace there. It was a wealthy city not far from Jerusalem, filled with homes of aristocracy.² And here, Jesus meets Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, Mark tells us. Bartimaeus is blind, begging beside the road, perhaps hoping that some wealthy travelers heading up to Jerusalem for Passover might take pity on him and give him some spare change. We don't know much else, but we do know his name, and we know who his father is. Depending on whose definition you read, Timaeus means "unclean" or "highly prized."³ That's nice, but we can guess that Bartimaeus is not highly prized, even if his father is. And yet he is someone's son, just as the Zebedee boys are. He has been born into a family, a community, and yet, here he sits begging for scraps on the edge of town. And even without having seen the miracles and the healings and the feeding of thousands, he recognizes another Son passing by. He knows that the long awaited Son of David has come near. He cries out for mercy. He will not be sidelined when Jesus is so close by. They—whoever they are—try to silence him, but he will not be silenced. He gets who this is. He gets what this Jesus has come to do. Jesus calls for him, and he casts off his coat, which is likely all that protects him and all that he owns, and runs to Jesus. And Jesus asks him the very same question he asks James and John. Jesus gives Bartimaeus the same care, the same patience, the same attention he gives to two of his inner circle, two who have watched him walk on water, two who have seen him cast out demons, two who have seen him bring a little girl back from the brink of death and heal a woman who simply touched his cloak, two who have scaled the mountain with him and seen him transformed before their eyes: "What do you want me to do for you?"

² *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*, NRSV, footnote, p.1726.

³ <https://biblehub.com/greek/5090.htm>

What do you want me to do for you? James and John ask for position; Bartimaeus asks to see. It is a simple and poignant request, and it reveals just how vulnerable Bartimaeus is. And he does not seem to care. His plea also reveals that in Jesus he can imagine something more than the only life he has known. He has spent days, weeks, years even at the mercy of the world around him. Vulnerability is not new to him. Someone who can heal him and give him back his life *is* new, and he is not going to throw away his shot. But it's not simply about the fact that Jesus can do something for him; it is not simply a transaction. As my friend and colleague Mary Ann McKibben Dana notices, Bartimaeus's name for Jesus changes as he comes closer. From a distance Jesus is the Son of David, the Messiah. Up close, when asked directly how Jesus can help him, he pleads, "my teacher, let me see again."⁴ Jesus is James and John's teacher, too, of course. Maybe they have been too close up to see who Jesus is; maybe they are too concerned with the building of a kingdom or the next run-in with the Pharisees; maybe they have simply forgotten how desperately they need him, too.

Steve Hayner was president of Columbia Seminary in Decatur, Georgia for close to six years before his death from pancreatic cancer in 2015. Hayner was a man of deep faith who was held in high esteem within the church and the academic community. Through his CaringBridge site, Hayner and his wife kept people posted on his condition while also sharing their reflections as well as reflections from others who wanted to testify to Steve's impact on their lives and faith. One friend wrote:

My favorite unique memory with you was years ago at Wellspring Retreat Center. You remember we were given various iterations of the 'trust walk.' In one of those exercises we were supposed to guide our blindfolded partner from behind using only our voice. You walked in front of me and I directed you with only words into a small thicket of woods. I had you stepping over logs and ducking down below strong branches. You went slowly and could feel dead wood snapping beneath your feet and all of the twigs on your face as you brushed past them. You knew that you were walking through a very thick and tangled terrain—a precarious path for someone blindfolded and having to trust only the words spoken to them.

⁴ Mary Ann McKibben Dana in her paper for the Well in 2015.

Then I brought you almost out of the woods to the very edge of a large flat grassy field and stopped you 6 inches from the grass – you were still standing in the woods blindfolded (you remember, right?). You had no idea that all the tangles and tripping hazards and undergrowth and slapping branches and hard trees were behind you and that before you was only a broad, flat, lush field of green grass. You were still in the woods imagining yourself stuck in the midst of all the tangles and hazards. Only I knew that before you it was all level and open and free of any encumbrance or danger or fear.

Then I said, ‘At the count of three I want you to run straightforward as fast as you can.’

I counted to three and, with great trust, you took off running, charging ahead, screaming your lungs out, flailing your arms—worried that you were still careening through the woods but also suddenly laughing to find out that you were out of the tangled danger and running easily into a flat field full of soft and forgiving grass.

This is the journey ahead for you my friend, whenever it is that you take it. The Word is behind you but also goes before you; the Word-made-flesh walks with you and is within you. And therefore all shall be well, and all shall be well—and all manner of things shall be well. The nausea and the discomfort, the fear and weakness, the tears and the treatments (the tripping hazards and the threatening thicket) will be over and you will run full speed screaming and laughing into the forgiving arms of grace and the healing heart of God.⁵

“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asks. I want to see. I want to let go of my power and privilege, of my concern for influence and prestige. I am not good at trust walks, but I want to trust that all will be well. I am not good at vulnerability, but I want to give myself over body and soul to this One who comes to free me, to free us, to free everyone from fear, hatred, stubbornness, grief, division, and pain. I want to have the faith to see the Son of David, my only true Savior when he is right in front of me. I want the courage to shed all that I cling to for safety and run headlong into the waiting arms of my dear teacher who is saving me even now. I want to follow the One who makes me whole and welcomes me on the way, no matter where that way may lead. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁵ As cited by Mary Ann McKibben Dana in her paper for the Well 2015.