

“Answer”
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
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Mark 10:46-52

If Jesus asked one of us, “What do you want me to do for you,” how would we respond? Maybe we’d offer the beauty pageant answer, “World peace,” or perhaps we’d be a bit more practical. Immortality might be nice, or fame, fortune, or a chance of a do-over at critical moment in life. The list could be quite long. Whatever our answer, the question would likely surprise us. After all, doesn’t Jesus already know what we want?

Surely, when it came to blind Bartimaeus, the clues were clear. It’s hard to overlook someone who can’t see. In fact, Jesus seems slightly silly when he asks of a blind man, “What do you want me to do for you?” Isn’t it obvious? But Jesus asked anyway.

Was it a test of faith designed to find out if Bartimaeus believed that Jesus could restore his sight? We don’t know why Jesus asked that pivotal question, but ask it he did, and he still does. Truth is we may not know what we want. We may think we do. We may be convinced that what we want is what we need, and sometimes, undoubtedly, we’re right. It could even seem so obvious that we see no cause for question and answer. But the conversation is crucial; hence, for us, the extraordinary importance of prayer.

Bartimaeus reminds us that we must call out to Jesus, unashamed of the opinions of others, confident that in Jesus alone our hope resides. Here is a desperate man, aware that this was probably his only shot, and despite those who tried to shush him, he shouted out all the louder for Jesus, making a spectacle to gain the notice of the one person who could radically change his life for the better.

Many people would have heeded the demands of their neighbors to remain silent, to not disturb the wise teacher with the controversial reputation. Back then, it was thought that illness was directly connected to the sins of the sufferer or their forbearers. Drawing attention to yourself would do nothing more than increase the shame. The same stigma can still attach to sickness today, but we know that being sick is nothing to be embarrassed about. It happens. The only thing that really ought to embarrass us is when we lack faith to call out to Jesus, when we deny his power to restore us.

Of course, the story of Bartimaeus is about more than a miraculous physical healing. Throughout the Gospel of Mark, it's made plain that many cannot see Jesus for who he is. Even the disciples, his closest companions, frequently appear confused about his identity. Bartimaeus is a symbol that represents the spiritual blindness of those who had sought the Messiah for so long yet failed to perceive his arrival in Jesus. Jesus simply was not the Messiah people expected. They were locked into habits of thinking that basically blinded them to the presence of the Messiah in their midst.

Yet Bartimaeus, when asked, "What do you want me to do for you," answered full of faith, trusting in the promise that the Messiah would come and indeed had come in Jesus. How did Bartimaeus know? It's hard to say with certainty, but we cannot ignore the role of waiting and anticipation – two things we are constantly tempted to avoid in our culture of immediate gratification. Those patient practices prepared Bartimaeus to seek help from Jesus. The insight of blind Bartimaeus was also a product of courage: the courage to risk hope; the courage to dream, to imagine the possibility of a brighter future, both literally and figuratively.

Likewise, we cannot expect that Jesus will conform to our assumptions or preferences. We are called to embrace the revelation of God with openness of heart and suppleness of mind.

The presence of Christ can be perceived by those who prayerfully prepare, by study of scripture and self-sacrifice, to receive him, even if the way Jesus appears surprises us. The gift of wisdom, the gift of discernment, is a grace we receive, not a product of our effort; yet wisdom does not fall into a person's lap serendipitously. It comes to those who want it enough to wait, and who are humble enough to accept it even when what is revealed may not meet our expectations or desires.

So when asked by Jesus, "What do you want me to do for you," how will you respond? Do we trust in Jesus, or doubt his power? Will we cower before popular opinion and our own sense of shame, or will we shout out with courageous hope? Are we trapped by pre-conceived notions, or able to accept Jesus as he is? The question has been asked. Each of us, each day, has both the privilege and the responsibility to answer. Use the opportunity well, and take heart. Jesus is calling you. Amen.