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Stewarding Our Faith
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As I get older, there are certain things I have to accept about who I am. One of those things is that I am one of those people who yells their encouragement at sporting events. This happens, yes, even when it is on TV. I will cheer and yell out and talk to the players. But when I am at a live sporting event, I just can't help myself. Last winter, we would go out to play broomball with our neighbors (think hockey with a ball and brooms) and I would cheer for everyone, even when they weren't on my team, much to my teammates annoyance. But I just get so excited and caught up and I can't seem to help it.

So, I have some compassion for the man in our scripture reading today known as blind Bartimaeus as he yells out to Jesus. He's calling out for a different reason, yes, but I can understand the inability to curb the impulse and find yourself yelling, even as those around you do not.

But Bartimaeus was not just yelling for encouragement or cheering Jesus on. Bartimaeus was yelling out of a deep seated desire to see Jesus. In this case, as a blind man, to literally be able to see him. And the people who also gathered to see Jesus, heard Bartimaeus yelling and were embarrassed by his neediness, his eagerness, his insistence on getting Jesus' attention. They sternly shushed him. They wanted him to curtail his desperate outpouring.

But when Jesus heard him, he stopped and called to him. And when Bartimaeus heard the invitation, the scripture says he threw off his cloak (likely his only real possession),

sprang up and went to Jesus. In other words, having actually gotten Jesus' attention, he didn't suddenly get nervous or embarrassed, but was still full of enthusiasm and eagerness. Bartimaeus was a man who believed he was about to be healed, have his whole life changed, and he could barely contain himself.

And then Jesus asked him this amazing question. "What do you want me to do for you?" Bartimaeus was ready with his answer. He wanted to see again. And so he did. And Jesus told him his faith made him well.

His faith. So, let's stop here a moment just to make sure we acknowledge that there have been a lot of different interpretations of what Jesus means by this. "Your faith has made you well" is at the root of TV evangelist faith healings, which long pre-date TV. And it has led people to believe that if they don't receive a physical healing there must be something deficient about their faith. They haven't prayed hard enough or asked the right way.

And that interpretation might make sense if you only look at this specific phrase. But if we look at the larger context of what Jesus is doing, there is another way to understand this phrase. See, this central section of Mark is bookended with stories of the healing of blind men and everything in between those two stories is about what it means to "see," understand, and follow Jesus, the Messiah who comes not on a warhorse but as a suffering servant. And when the word faith is used in Mark, it isn't about praying with the right words or believing a certain thing, but about actions of courage and a readiness to change one's life to follow Jesus. So, when Jesus said that Bartimaeus' faith healed him, he's talking about Bartimaeus' courageous, eager, boisterous, enthusiastic, honest trust in Jesus and his true desire to follow him. And yes, Bartimaeus' request to see is certainly self-motivated, but it was also the only way in that time and place he

would have had any chance of actually following Jesus on Jesus' pilgrimage to Jerusalem. A blind man would never be able to follow - to go from town to town with him without someone committed to caring for him.

Rev. Susan Andrews describes Bartimaeus this way: ““He begs, he shouts, he shouts even louder, he jumps up, he throws off, and, immediately, he follows. . . . There is nothing cool or careful about Bartimaeus. There is nothing proper or pious or proud. There is no mirage of self-sufficiency to distance him from Jesus. There is just persistent, honest need and an offering of that need assertively and eagerly to Jesus.”

Bartimaeus was ready to leave everything behind, give up the life he knew, and make huge changes to his life. His is the story of an outsider who understood that Jesus was the Messiah. And Bartimaeus' story is the last story before Jesus heads into Jerusalem for Palm Sunday. There have been so many stories of people misunderstanding or turning away from Jesus when they do understand and here right at the end we have an example of Bartimaeus, who as a blind man, sees Jesus for who he truly is and understands the cost of following.

So, the question for us is: how can we be more like Bartimaeus? When Jesus looked at Bartimaeus and surely knew what he would ask Jesus for, Jesus still stopped to ask: “what do you want me to do for you?” This was because Jesus wanted Bartimaeus to say it out loud, to own it, to articulate the desire that would change his life. Jesus wanted him to be ready for his healing and all that would come with it.

Which is where we can put ourselves into the story, because Jesus wants to know the same thing from us – what do we want him to do for us? What do we want from Jesus?

Biblical scholar Frederick Dale Bruner says it this way:

“Jesus [is actually always] ask[ing] us to articulate our real need, our real desire. . . . [Yet sometimes our response is only to ask Jesus] for a little of this and a little of that to make our lives more comfortable, less burdensome. [But why is that? Why do we not ask] for something only Jesus can give, the healing of our deepest wounds, our most insidious sins?”

One reason we may not ask Jesus for these harder things, is that it will require change and work on our part. Our deepest wounds and most insidious sins may cause us a lot of pain and struggle, but perhaps the phrase “the devil we know” works well here. Our wounds and sins are what we know. We’ve learned how to manage with them. We know what kinds of trouble they are going to cause us. Who knows what we might learn about ourselves or have to change in our lives to actually be healed of these things. Yes, the blind man got his sight back, but he also threw off his only possession and went on the road to Jerusalem with a bunch of strangers for the total unknown. This vision of faith is courageous, audacious and bold. And it invites us to think more deeply about what it is we really need healing from. Do you need healing from stubbornness or cynicism or apathy; self-doubt or self-righteousness; resentment or cowardness; privilege or self-centeredness? What is getting in your way of living a full and joyful life?

A faith like Bartimaeus’ will certainly help, if we are to approach this kind of healing. A faith which won’t be shushed or hidden away. A faith that can’t control the impulse to want to see Jesus in every opportunity. A faith willing to toss everything to the side and run to wherever Jesus is. A faith that is bold and courageous - that desires healing and to follow Jesus wherever it leads. Will the healing of our deepest wounds and most insidious sins be wonderful and help us to carry fewer burdens and live with joy and

open hearts? I believe the answer is yes. Yes, it will. But will it be easy or what we expect? Less likely.

But if we do decide to bring our desire for healing to Jesus, and begin to actually find our spirits mending, we should not be surprised to find that it is not the end of the story. Rather, in telling Jesus what we want, eventually we will know more clearly what it is Jesus wants from us. Rarely does healing come and then one just goes about the rest of their lives quietly with nothing much to do. No, when we experience healing, it is a new beginning of our life as a servant of God. Healing brings with it a deep sense of compassion for others who are hurting. Healing opens our eyes to see Jesus in new places and people. Healing leads us to want nothing less than healing for everyone else. And soon enough, we might find ourselves walking around doing crazy things like Jesus did – trying to help others heal, speaking out against people and systems that cause pain and suffering, not worrying so much about our own safety and taking risks for the gospel instead of living with fear. We might not even recognize ourselves in the transformation.

So, as you go into this week, imagine Jesus standing before you asking “what do you want me to do for you?” and start to widen your vision. Let yourself dig deep into the places where you truly need some healing. And then allow Bartimaeus to be your guide and bring your truest, realist desires to Jesus with courage and boldness and eagerness that won’t be shushed. And may you find yourself met by the love and grace, mercy and strength of God. Amen.