

Sermon: Sunday, October 24, 2021

Ain't Too Proud to Shout

Mark 10:46 – 52

Bartimaeus is not a bit player in the gospel. Only Mark gives us his name. But I am not convinced that we are able to find much of value in the story of Bartimaeus. Most of us are not blind, at least not in the physical sense. And we are a well-mannered people, and we are not likely to cry out in insistent, piercing, loud, and embarrassing ways in front of other people. What can the story of a shouting blind man have to do with us?

JERICO A PLACE THAT MATTERS

Bartimaeus is from Jericho – a place that pops up in the Old Testament when Joshua and Israel showed up at the gates, and a woman named Rahab becomes the heroine of the story. Jericho pops up in a story of Jesus – a man on the road to Jericho. Jericho is with us today in Bartimaeus. And in the spirit of Dr. King, we need to fix the Jericho Roads in our cities. Jericho is everywhere – dangerous, fearful, rundown places.

When I arrived at church this morning at 8:30 there were six men standing at the door. I felt as if the story of Bartimaeus had confronted me. They were all talking at once about hearing that there was a hot breakfast available this morning at EFC. I felt bad that there was no hot breakfast. I wondered if we should be having more conversations about how to meet the needs of our community than the ones we have about old grudges, resentments, and ideas. As those six guys walked away, one of them in a wheelchair, I felt God had sent me a stark message about the future of the church and it has something to do with Bartimaeus. I've never had my sermon meet me at the church door before. Bartimaeus is at the door everywhere and he's at our door this morning. What are we going to do for Bartimaeus?

ASPECT BLINDNESS

The gospels say Bart was blind. What does that have to do with us? Let's start with a musing of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. "Could there be," he queried, "human beings lacking in the capacity to see something as something – and what would it be like? What sort of consequences would it have? Would this defect be comparable to color-blindness or to not having absolute pitch? – We will call it 'aspect blindness.'"

What if we have lost the ability to tell the truth from the lie? Proverbs claims there is a way that seems right to people but its end is the way of death. There are people peddling lies as truth – they are the "snake oil" salesmen of the 21st century. They don't go from town to town in a wagon, but they peck out lies on a computer and post messages on the web. Once we said that one person's trash is another person's treasure. Now, one's person's lie is another person's truth. What if we have lost the ability to know what is

good for a flourishing life? What if we have lost the ability to know what it takes to sustain a viable democracy as a nation? Eddie Glaude, African American scholar, in *Democracy in Black*, says that we have become a fearful people – afraid of one another. He says that fear has shadowed American life ever since democracy and slavery existed together in an unholy alliance.

Eddie Glaude says, “When I drive Stuyvesant Avenue in Trenton, NJ, at night, I feel a deep concern about my own safety. In some quarters it is known as “Little Iraq.” Shootings, drug deals, and other illicit behavior happen on this street.” But he notes that his reasonable concern is bound up with other assumptions about this particular street, and about the people who live there. He says that we develop broader assumptions and beliefs about Trenton, about cities, about poor African Americans. In other words, we all have an already developed sense of danger of the space and the people who inhabit it. Political fear takes our narrow concerns about a street or a neighborhood and makes them more generalized. Pretty soon we start thinking that black people are a general threat to the fabric of our society. That’s how we have become afraid of Muslims even though they pray five times a day. That’s how we have become afraid of illegal immigrants even though the likelihood of being killed by an immigrant is 1 in 10.9 million. David Fea says, “One is more likely to die from walking across a railroad track or having one’s clothes catch spontaneously fire” (*Believe Me*, 18). When our fears are irrational, when we generalize and universalize from a single incident, we are suffering from “aspect blindness” (Wittgenstein). We no longer see something as something; we can’t tell the truth from the lie. The deception covers us like “fog on a coffin lid” (Allan Gurganus).

Oppressors are always fearful and always blind to their fear. Pharaoh was blind to his own fears about his enslavement of the Israelites, but his fears invaded his dreams – 7 skinny cows and 7 fat cows. How odd that the richest, more powerful person in the world was riddled with fears and insecurities. The richer we become, the more we have, the more fearful we are. This is the Achilles heel of secularism. It can’t calm your fears.

TIME TO MAKE A SCENE

Bartimaeus makes a scene because he knows he is blind, and this may be the only chance he has to see again. He is under no illusions. If we all could join Bartimaeus outside the city of Jericho, and cry out, “Lord have mercy,” and “Lord, let me see again,” we might recover our sight.

It’s time for a closer look at Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus was a shouter. Right off the bat, we are not interested. Shouting has never been our thing. Mark tells us, “He begin to shout.” When the people told him to be quiet or as Marks puts it, “Sternly ordered him to be quiet,” Bartimaeus cried out even more loudly.” Even if being among shouters makes you nervous, Bartimaeus is your brother. The Jericho crowd didn’t like shouting. I think they were afraid, and that fear had been part of their history. Jericho, I’m sure you remember, had a history with shouting. You know the story from Sunday school and Vacation Bible School: Jericho’s wall came a tumbling down when the children of God shouted.

Sometimes there are events that people can never forget, stop talking about, stop thinking about. Jericho's history must have divided into before the wall came tumbling down and after the wall came tumbling down. It's like Katrina and New Orleans. It's like 911 and the World Trade towers. Maybe there were still signs in the town square: "NO SHOUTING!" When Jericho people head shouting, they heard their walls rumbling and feared they would once more come a tumbling down.

SHOUTING TIME

Personally, I identify with Bartimaeus. I was raised by a shouting people. The sermons of my childhood filled the air with raucous "Amens". They floated down from the ceilings – deep, rich bass voices shouting Amen! Preach it brother! Now, our "Amens" are printed in the order of worship and are almost unnoticeable. The only Amen that gets attention now is the final one because people can't wait for church to end (Mark Twain observed). I was so accustomed to the congregation's amens, that when I moved north and no one said a word during my sermons, I felt like a total failure. Once in frustration, I asked, "Can I get an 'Amen'?" Not a peep. Not a nod. Dead silence. Strange looks. I was a long time learning that plenty of Christians are not shouters.

Instead of shouting to one another, we need to cry out to Jesus. Is that our problem? In all our shouting at one another, we have pushed Jesus aside and forgotten that he could help us. We need to plead with Jesus to let us see. There's a parable about this need to speak up, in Dr. Seuss and *Horton Hears a Who*. I know Dr. Seuss is not in good standing in many circles today, but this parable is too important not to recall. There once lived a microscopically small people on a puff ball, and no one could hear them. They were under dire threat of extinction and all the Who's in Whoville had to shout for this one elephant to hear them.

Here are a few lines from the story: "Mr. Mayor! You've got to prove now that you really are there! So call a big meeting. Get everyone out! Make every Who holler! Make every Who shout! Make every Who scream! If you don't every Who is going to end up in a Beezle-Nut stew!" Finally, a shirker named Jo Jo added one final shout to the shouting Whos of Whoville. He shouted one small, "Yopp" and that one small, extra Yopp put it over." Everyone heard the shouting Whos of Whoville and they were saved.

If you knew your only route to salvation was to shout, to raise a ruckus, could you manage it? Could you get enough decibels to be heard? "Lord, have mercy on me!" If you knew that our democracy was in grave danger, would you be willing to shout it from the rooftops? Would you become a shouter in an emergency? If you feel like a "Who" – small, insignificant, helpless – and your only hope of salvation is an elephant that doesn't hear well, how loud would you shout?

Shouting is more than decibels; it is also action. It is showing up. It is being faithful to the church. It is helping other people. Some people shout by the way they live their lives, by the actions they take, and the people they help.

Jesus asks, “What do you want me to do for you?” This is a sacred moment. The Lord of life, the Savior of the world, is asking you, “What do you want me to do for you?” How do you answer? Maybe this is that defining moment when you join the shouting Bartimaeus and cry, “Let me see again! Let me live again, Lord! Let me see again!”