

On the Way, By the Way, or In the Way?

Mark 10: 46-52

The four Gospels all tell the same story of Jesus' life and ministry, but each one tells it in its own unique style. Reading Mark's version can feel like sitting in the back seat of an Uber whose driver is careening down city streets and running red lights to get you to your destination as quickly as possible, while avoiding any small talk on the way. Jesus is portrayed as always active, always on the move. Some of Mark's favorite words are *immediately*, or *at once*.

It is fitting then, that the setting for most of Mark is on the road, on the *way* to somewhere. In fact, the early followers of Jesus often referred to themselves as "People of the Way": meaning the Way of the Lord. Probably out of Jesus' claim that he was the "*way*, the truth and the life." So, try to think of the physical journey that Jesus and his followers were on as also being a symbolic journey of faith. They are all "on the way" along the road of discipleship.

These followers on the Way passed through Jericho, which was only about a day's walk to their final destination. Jerusalem. Which is where Jesus knows a cross awaits him, and after that a resurrection. But his followers didn't want to hear that. They closed their ears to his attempts to prepare them for it and closed their eyes to the warning signs along the way.

As they passed through Jericho they encounter a beggar named Bartimaeus, who literally was blind. The New Revised Standard Bible says that Bartimaeus was *sitting by the roadside*. He is by the roadside, but he is not on the road. But the Greek word Mark uses here can be translated as "road" or it can be translated as "way." Most importantly for understanding the intention of this story, Bartimaeus is **by the Way** but he is not **on the Way**. Symbolically speaking, Bartimaeus, who sits *by the way*, is an observer, but not a traveler on *the Way*. To call a blind man an observer might sound like an oxymoron. But in the Bible, blindness describes not only a physical condition of sightlessness; but also a spiritual condition of being without vision or understanding.

Yet, even though Bartimaeus cannot see, when he learns that Jesus is passing by, he cries out to him. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" "Son of David" is a title that harkens back to the days of King David. David wanted to build a house (a Temple, to be precise) where God would dwell in Jerusalem. God told him that he would not be the one to build a house for God. Instead, God made a covenant with David. A promise that one day one of David's descendants would rule over a kingdom that would have no end. For centuries the Jewish people awaited the arrival of this "Son of David", who they looked forward to as God's chosen Messiah. What is extraordinary about Bartimaeus addressing Jesus as "Son of David" is that he was expressing his belief that Jesus was this long-awaited Messiah.

What is significant, although not immediately obvious, is that this is the first time in Mark's Gospel that anyone has called Jesus "Son of David." Ironically, the first person to see Jesus for

who he truly is, turns out not to be those who are *on the Way* with him, but a blind beggar who is merely *by the way*. If anything, those who are *on the Way*, almost get *in the way* of Bartimaeus' attempted encounter with Jesus!

Even though Bartimaeus lacks sight, he still has a voice and he calls even louder, "JESUS, SON OF DAVID, HAVE MERCY ON ME!" And Jesus stops everything and everyone on the Way, and waits for Bartimaeus to be brought to him. When the people in the crowd tell Bartimaeus that Jesus is calling for him, the jubilant beggar springs to his feet and throws off his cloak to go to Jesus.

There is something more profound than unbridled enthusiasm in Bartimaeus' response to Jesus' invitation. The cloak that Bartimaeus tossed aside was almost certainly pretty raggedy and unclean. But it was the only real possession that he owned. It was the only thing that kept him warm at night and protected him from the hot sun by day. Emotionally, it was sort of like his security blanket. When he threw it away, he was literally leaving behind everything he owned to be *on the way* to Jesus, instead of *by the way as* Jesus passed by.

Jesus asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?" Just a short time before this, two of Jesus' closest disciples—James and John—went behind the other disciples' backs to ask a favor of him. Jesus asked *them* the same question he asked Bartimaeus now. "What is it that you want me to do for you?" They said, "Grant that when you come into your glory, one of us will be there on your left and the other on your right." James and John had been on the Way with Jesus since the start of his ministry. They had personally observed his humanity and his humility. Like a patient teacher, he had taught the disciples again and again that the Way of discipleship called for a willingness to sacrifice, instead of the pursuit of personal glory. Yet, here they were, too blind to see how their preoccupation with what they personally stood to gain by following Jesus was getting in the way of their serving Jesus' higher purpose for them.

When blind Bartimaeus came to him, Jesus asked him the same question he had put to James and John earlier. "What do you want me to do for you?" He said, "My teacher, let me see again." There were two aspects of Bartimaeus' response which revealed clearer vision on his part than what Jesus' sighted disciples possessed.

First, he addressed Jesus as "my teacher." Which is the proper way that a disciple would address the one he or she followed. Too often along the way, when Jesus tried teaching the disciples something they didn't want to hear, they behaved as if they were the teachers and Jesus, was a student whose wrong ideas needed to be corrected. A good example of their spiritual blindness was when Jesus predicted that he would be betrayed and crucified after they reached Jerusalem, Peter rebuked Jesus for talking that way, as if he was the teacher and Jesus, was the pupil. Bartimaeus has a better awareness of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus than did the disciples who had followed him from the beginning.

The other noteworthy aspect of Bartimaeus' reply to Jesus' question, is that he asks to see again. Rather than ask for privileges or rewards for himself, Bartimaeus asks for greater vision,

to better follow Jesus. Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” And immediately two things happened, as a result of Bartimaeus’ faith. First, he regained his sight. Second, he followed Jesus on the way. On the way to Jerusalem, and on the Way of discipleship.

As we inch along the road toward the end of this year, emerging from under the shadow of the pandemic, what is our vision for the future? Are we ready to throw off the cloak of the past couple of years and spring up and resume our following Jesus on the Way? Or is the inertia of the past year or two, leaving us content to stay by the way.

The pandemic has forced many of us to be more *by the way* than *on the way*, hasn’t it? Circumstances beyond our control have gotten *in the way* of being the Church as we were used to being. COVID has in some ways made us all like beggars, desperate for the comforts and joys of the spiritual community we cherish. We may have grown used to church life being more like passively watching from the sidelines than being part of the parade. Getting “back to normal” means more than simply worshiping under the same roof again. It means offering our time, energy and creativity to the serving the needs of those outside these walls. Committees that are so essential to the ministries of this church have been put in the position of faithfully fulfilling their purpose with less people to share the load. Friends, that is a road that leads to burnout for individuals, and weakening of the church’s mission. Many positions will need to be filled for us to get back on track again. But our faith, can and will restore our vision where it may have dimmed.

I invite us all in the weeks ahead, to prayerfully consider how and where each of us can express our faith through service. Let us throw off the inhibitions and the reservations that keep us sidelined *by the Way*, instead of *on the Way*; where we are invited to embrace new expressions of discipleship. Let us ask Jesus for renewed vision to see where he is calling us to be of service. Let our faith overcome whatever may be in the way of responding to that call. Because, *We* are the People of the Way for this time and in this place.

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Preached FCCW on October 24, 2021