

Sermon on Mark 10:46-52
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I think the most crowded place I've ever been was on the bridge that leads from one side of the University of Georgia football stadium to the other. It was just before the opening kickoff of a Georgia vs. Tennessee football game. There were mobs of people, many of them several beers away from sober, pushing down on me on that bridge. People in red and orange...mostly red...were shoved up against me. My small town, mountain girl self had never been a part of such madness before. If I had wanted to go a different way, there is no way I could have. It was one way...into the stadium. Ross loved it. I hated it.

Crowds have always left me feeling somewhat uncomfortable. Too many people. Not enough space. Too much noise. Too much chance for mob rule. Too much for little ol' me.

Maybe that's why I'm drawn to thinking about the crowd in the story of this blind man named Bartimaeus.

Imagine for a moment that you are Bartimaeus and what this crowd might have meant for you. You have been unable to see for many years. Your blindness is due to an illness as a young adult.

Over the years, you have become accustomed to your affliction. After all, you have no other choice. It's not as if you will wake up one day, able to see again. That would take a miracle. You've lost your family and your home. You live in the streets with only the cloak on your back, begging for scraps or rotten leftovers. But, you live with your blindness because you have no other choice. When you are able to let yourself think deeply, you know that your deepest desire is to regain your sight. But enough of that...it's time to get to the city gate. You need to eat tonight, after all.

And so, you carefully make your way to the outskirts of town where you squat down in the dust with your cloak thrown over your shoulders to keep the sun off your skin. And you begin to call out to the passersby, "Can you spare some change, sir?" "Ma'am, do you have an extra piece of bread for a poor old blind man?"

And then you hear it, feet, lots of them, stomping through the dust, headed your way. What would a crowd be doing, heading this way on a Tuesday morning? Surely they aren't coming to round up all the poor beggars again. That was awful last time. Bewildered, and more than a little bit frightened, you shrink back from the edge of the road. From the place you hope is inconspicuous, you begin to hear familiar voices...Levi the butcher, Ephraim the shephard, Ruth the mother of James, Peter, the young man who is following that man named Jesus. Could it be? Is Jesus, the one who heals, coming this way? Could it be true? Will he see you? The voices come closer. The feet are almost on top of you. But, wait, now they're passing by. No! No! Wait! You can't help it. You call out..."Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

And then, you feel it...the enmity of the crowd. If you could see, you know you would watch their eyes turn toward you with loathing. They don't want Jesus to hear you. They are embarrassed. They don't want Jesus to notice you because you remind them that they aren't taking care of you. They aren't doing what God calls them to do in the holy scriptures. And you remind them of their own fears. "Please God, don't let us become like Bartimaeus. He's pitiful. He's pathetic."

But, so what? What do you have to lose? Your life? Who cares? You want to see. You want to know more about this man Jesus.

Now, it's easy for us to visualize this scene from afar...to read about it and see it as a nice healing story from Jesus' life. But if we are honest, I think we might see ourselves in that crowd.

Think back to 1996, Atlanta, Georgia...the city hosted the summer Olympics. The people of the city worked so hard to look beautiful. New trees and flowers were planted.

Downtown windows were cleaned until they shone. Streets and sidewalks were repaired. New buildings went up to house athletes and to hold the events. And behind the hustle and bustle, new laws were passed. These laws said that people could no longer lie down on park benches or loiter in the shelter of doorways. They said that no one could stay in a certain spot for more than an hour or two, and panhandling was outlawed. Cleaning up the city...let's not let the outside world see that Atlanta has homeless people. If they do, they will know that we aren't taking care of our own.

Or think of the healthcare debate going on right now. It seems like the crowd doesn't want to hear the questions from the poor, from those on the outside. Instead, we want to ask questions about our own healthcare premiums and whether covering everyone with equal healthcare will make our own costs rise.

Or think of the debate even within even the Presbyterian church over whether homosexual people should be ordained. The crowd is frightened. Don't let Jesus see those homosexual folks on the margin. We don't want to let them in. We have it all figured out. We know who should be able to walk in this crowd next to Jesus. Keep the outsiders on the edge of the road.

Keep the outsiders on the outside. Don't let them call attention to themselves. Jesus might see. And then, Jesus will know that we aren't living up to our calling.

Notice though, in this healing story today, Jesus doesn't respond to the crowd's shushing of Bartimaeus. He doesn't reprimand them for keeping those on the margins out. He doesn't question their faithfulness. He doesn't remind them of scriptures' call to take care of those on the outside. Instead, he turns to the crowd and says, "Tell him to come to me." He turns to the crowd and asks them to offer his invitation.

So, this is not only a healing story for Bartimaeus. Yes, Jesus heals the blind man. And the blind man sees and follows Jesus on the way. But, Jesus, with his words of invitation to Bartimaeus, also extends an invitation to the crowd to be healed, to open their eyes and see.

Is this story a miracle? Yes it is. Jesus once again holds out his healing hands and offers his eye-opening, life-giving love to Bartimaeus, to the crowd, and to us.

Jesus calls us to see and hear the blind and the lame, the diseased and the hurting, the oppressed and the poor, anyone who is on the outside looking in. Not only does Jesus call us to see them; Jesus calls us to give his invitation of love and healing to them. In our seeing, hearing, and offering Christ's healing, we too gain our sight. We, too, gain life.

Will we be silencers or healers? Amen.