

**Rev. Adrienne Meier**

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**Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana**

### **A Bold Discipleship**

#### **Mark 10:46-52, NRSV, emended**

As Jesus and his disciples were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus—a blind beggar and son of Timaeus—was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to call out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' Jesus came to a stop and said, 'Call him over here.' And they called to the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart, get up, he is calling for you.' So, throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' The blind man said to him, 'My Teacher, let me see again.' Jesus said to him, 'Go, your faith has made you well.' Immediately Bartimaeus received his sight and followed Jesus on the way.

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Jacques Lusseyran was not born blind.<sup>1</sup> He did have poor eyesight, but a childhood fistfight drove his glasses into his eyes and, from the age of seven, he was permanently and completely blind. His parents refused to pity him, refused a specialty school, refused to let him be sidelined in society. They learned Braille, kept him in his original school, embraced his blindness with curiosity, telling him, "Always tell us when you discover something." During World War II, Jacques worked in the French Resistance until, in 1944, he was arrested by the Gestapo and sent to Buchenwald. Angry and frustrated, he began to run into walls, tripping over tables. But then he returned to what had sustained him throughout his life: he paid attention. He had learned that the light within himself dimmed when he was sad or afraid, but with attention—with love—it shone bright. Today, another blind man holds our attention, Bartimaeus, who arrives in the story in time to be the surprising example of true discipleship: the one who pays attention, who refuses to be quiet, who follows Jesus on the way to the cross.

The issue at stake in these middle passages of Mark's gospel isn't an academic conversation about the nature of the messiah. Remember that we've been hearing a cycle of stories where Jesus explains what is going to happen to him—what it means to be a Messiah—and his disciples keep getting it all messed up. But, again, this isn't a theoretical conversation. What it is at stake is what it means to follow Jesus. Jesus says follow me, and the disciples say yes! Into the battle! Jesus says follow me, and the disciples say, yes! Into greatness! Jesus says follow me, and the disciples say, yes! Into fame and glory! No, no, no Jesus says. Not hero, suffering servant. Not greatest, but least. Not master, but servant of all. But now the time is growing short. In the next story, Jesus will enter into Jerusalem

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<sup>1</sup> I first encountered this story in Barbara Brown Taylor's *Learning to Walk in the Dark*.

on a colt, the crowds filling the air with shouts of Hosanna! Joyous pleas that God will “Save Now!” which will turn to shouts of “Crucify him!” by the week’s end. The disciples are unable to see—unable to understand what it means to follow Jesus.

In contrast, here is Bartimaeus, begging by the road, a man with no physical sight but who had eyes of faith. He felt the crowd shift and change, felt the electricity of the itinerant preacher, heard the rumors about messiahship. He paid careful attention, and when he felt the crowd pass by, he began to shout. He called out and again and again to Jesus, even as the faces of those around him reddened from embarrassment. Disability seems a universal language that the able bodied, the healthy are embarrassed by. We seem to think that a broken body is a broken mind; that delays in development are also delays in experiencing the fullness of humanity. We worry that disability is catching, and that reasonable accommodations are simply too much work for us. What fools we are! In Mark’s gospel it is the blind who see, the deaf who hear, the lame whose feet lead them in paths of righteousness. The woman whose bleeding disorder would push her out of a crowd, knows to push on. The Syrophenician mother knows the feast found in mere crumbs. The father who had lost faith that his child would be healed knows where to find the end to his unbelief. And Bartimaeus knows to cry out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Obviously, Jesus knew what Bartimaeus wanted. When Bartimaeus’s milky eyes couldn’t meet Jesus’s own, it could not have been more clear why Bartimaeus was begging on the Jericho roadside. But still, Jesus asks, “What do you want me to do for you?” Same question he asked James and John who wanted all the glory, but Bartimaeus takes no offense, asks for nothing more than one thing for which he longed for years, for his whole life, “Rabbouni—*my* teacher,—let me see again.”

True discipleship is crying out. True discipleship is paying attention to our—to the world’s—deep longing and giving it a voice. True discipleship is refusing to turn away from the brokenness of the world, but being willing to follow Jesus into it.

Bartimaeus is an example of faithful discipleship. Sightless, he has more insight than those the text calls disciples. A poor beggar, his possessions will not hinder him as they have the rich young many who could not follow Jesus. And though Jesus is days from the cross, when Jesus tells him, “Go,” Bartimaeus remains, following Jesus on the way.

Beloved, I think my understanding of faith is changing. Once, I thought that I engaged in discipleship practices—I worked hard to deepen my faith when everything in my life was going right. I did all this so that, when the inevitable dark night descended, my faith would be strong. I think I have gotten it all wrong. The truth is that everything I have ever learned about what it means to follow Jesus has come when I have been broken. I have learned about the resurrection from the cemetery. I have learned about wholeness from the hospital. I have learned faith from doubt. Discipleship isn’t tied to certainty. The twelve were certain. They were going to triumph. They were going to be heroes. They were

wrong. They ran away. They would end their lives in humiliation and ridicule—but there, they would finally live up to the title disciple. We are not likely dreaming of the kinds of greatness that so enticed the twelve, but we still dream of greatness, of perfection, and righteousness. But, again and again, Jesus calls us to a discipleship that pays attention to the world. We're not called away from the needs of the world in order to be conquerors, to prove how strong we are, how smart, how resilient. No, we're called to attend to the world, to see and name its pain and brokenness. To call out when the Son of David passes by, and to name with boldness what must be changed.

Amen.