



Sermon for the Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost, October 24, 2021

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Job 42:1-6, 10-17](#)

[Psalm 34:1-8, \(19-22\)](#)

[Hebrews 7:23-28](#)

[Mark 10:46-52](#)

*Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart.
All else be naught to me, save that Thou art.
Thou my best thought by day or by night.
Waking or sleeping, thy presence my light. Amen.
(from the Hymnal 488)*

“What do you want me to do for you?”

Jesus asks a question. A blind man cries out. Jesus stops and waits. The blind man finds his way forward to Jesus. And Jesus asks a question. “What do you want me to do for you?”

Once, long ago, about 33 years ago, I went on a weeklong retreat to a Catholic monastery and seminary in southern Indiana. I was seeking, I was muddled in confusion about next steps in my life, I was hungry for God's presence and direction. One of the monks served as my spiritual director for the week. I met with him daily, and spent long times in prayer and meditation each day. Each day, he gave me a scripture to read, and each time in the scripture, Jesus asked a question. On the first day, I ran into Jesus' question, “Who do you say that I am?” On the second day, the monk told me to read Mark chapter 10 and pay attention to the question that Jesus asked twice in that chapter, “What do you want me to do for you?”

I had to stop. Stop my drivenness, stop my scattered seeking for something I didn't know, stop my muddled scuffling around. I had to stop, and really think, pray, and take stock. What did I really want, most deeply, at the core of my being?

What about you? What do you want Jesus to do for you?

Jesus asked this question twice, to different people, within a very short distance in the Gospel of Mark – even in the same chapter. All in this amazing chapter in Mark, this 10th chapter, where we begin with Jesus gathering children to himself and saying that the kingdom of God belongs to people like these children. Then we find a rich man approaching Jesus asking to inherit eternal life and Jesus telling him the one thing he lacks is to give up his attachment and love of everything he possesses and owns, and the man went away sorrowful because he could not part with his things to follow Jesus. Then we hear Jesus foretell his suffering and death and rising for a third time, even as they were heading straight for Jerusalem – and we find James and John asking to be given positions of high honor and power in the kingdom of heaven, and Jesus telling them that they will follow him and experience what he is to experience, but that the one who will be first is the one who serves everyone fully and without reserve. And now, while passing through Jericho, we encounter a blind man calling out loudly to Jesus for mercy. And Jesus heals him, and the man joins Jesus and disciples on the road.

Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" twice within this chapter. First, he asks James and John. Next, he asks Bartimaeus the blind man. For James and John, their answer is about a desire for privileged and powerful positions alongside Jesus in the coming kingdom. For Bartimaeus, this blind beggar along the road, this stranger with a half-Jewish and half-Greek name, the answer is much more basic.

Bartimaeus wants with all his heart to see again.

And yet, even without seeing, Bartimaeus senses Jesus approaching and knows who he is. And Bartimaeus jumps out against social structures, he violates social expectations of keeping silent and in his place, and throws himself fully behind the cry of his heart. He cries out for mercy. When he is told to be quiet, he cries out even more loudly and insistently. When he is told that Jesus wants to see him, he rises and throws off his cloak – his only enduring possession – to come raw and simple before Jesus.

Jesus seemed to have a way of drawing people in their brokenness. With hands and heart to heal, and with glad welcome and openness to each who came, Jesus drew people from the shadows. They came from hidden corners of mourning and sadness, of loss and disability, of emptiness and day-by-day survival, to Jesus.

As my fellow clergy and I here in north Idaho studied and explored this text together, one retired pastor said this all reminded him of a poem. Some of you may know this poem, "Hector the Collector." You may have read it to your children or grandchildren, from Shel Silverstein's poems in *Where the Sidewalk Ends*.

(1) *Hector the Collector*

*Collected bits of string,
Collected dolls with broken heads
And rusty bells that would not ring.
Bent-up nails and ice-cream sticks,
Twists of wires, worn-out tires,
Paper bags and broken bricks.
Old chipped vases, half shoelaces,
Gatlin' guns that wouldn't shoot,
Leaky boasts that wouldn't float
And stopped-up horns that wouldn't toot.*

(2) *Butter knives that had no handles,*

*Copper keys that fit no locks,
Rings that were too small for fingers,
Dried-up leaves and patched-up socks.
Worn-out belts that had no buckles,
'Lectric trains that had no tracks,
Airplane models, broken bottles,
Three-legged chairs and cups with cracks.*

(3) *Hector the Collector*

*Loved these things with all his soul--
Loved them more than shining diamonds,
Loved them more than glistenin' gold.
Hector called to all the people,
'Come and share my treasure trunk!'
And all the silly sightless people
Came and looked ... and called it junk.¹*

¹ [Shel Silverstein](#), "Hector the Collector," in *Where the Sidewalk Ends*.

See, what's interesting in this healing moment is that it's other people, including Jesus' disciples, who are blind – they are caught up in seeing the world through their lenses of merit and deserving and undeserving, they are bound and blinded by their own senses of privilege and position. But it is Bartimaeus who actually sees, most clearly and deeply. Even physically blind, Bartimaeus actually does see. He sees Jesus for who he is, as heir to kingship, as son of David, as one who has power to have mercy and bring healing. And he sees himself as one who has nothing to lose and who is small.

Bartimaeus is not caught up in deserving or undeserving. He comes simply as he is, pleading for what he doesn't have, and asking for only that.

This moment from the Gospel of Mark connects in powerful ways with the story of Job that we pick up again today as well. Over the past four Sundays, there have been segments from the book of Job, carrying us through this tale of intense trial and tribulation for a man who had sought to follow God's ways. Job is taken to the depths of loss, losing first all of his wealth, his herds of animals, and his children and their families, then losing his own health and becoming afflicted with painful boils all over his body. Job spends chapter upon chapter demanding an explanation from God for his state, holding to a script he has held all his life, that if he lives a good and virtuous life and follows God's ways, he will be blessed – he will be privileged to escape deep suffering and will deserve instead to have at least a decent life. Job's friends try to convince him that he must have done something to get on God's bad side, and so they are caught in the same blindness, a blindness of viewing the world and life through the distorting lenses of deserving and privilege and position. In the end, Job hears from God. God answers Job's demand for a response, with questions: "Where were you when I formed the foundations of the earth?" Job, let me open your eyes to a bigger perspective, because you are absolutely and completely caught up in yourself. Job's eyes open, he sees things from God's perspective and hears the truth – that he is really only small, tiny, rather powerless, in the scope of the universe and of all that God has made. And Job turns to "repent in dust and ashes," to set aside his own sense of deserving – even of deserving an answer – and to acknowledge that God is God and that he is in no way God's equal and that he is utterly dependent on God.

This all reminds me of one of the twelve steps in AA, one of the first – admitting my own powerlessness, and yielding myself to and seeking help from a Power Higher than myself. The path to recovery from addiction begins with admitting the truth and looking squarely at our own powerlessness to change and our need for God's power.

When I stop being the center of the universe, when I see my own smallness and powerlessness and dependence for all things on others and the God of all Creation, I am ready to answer Jesus' question. I am ready to answer with my deepest yearning.

In this wonderful chapter from Mark's Gospel, we follow a path that takes us past our own worst inclinations. Unlike the rich young man, and unlike John and James, Bartimaeus the blind man was not concerned with deserving anything. He did not ask to inherit a place in the kingdom of heaven, thinking he deserved it by merit or could buy it with goodness. He did not ask for a position of prestige or power or fame or authority, thinking he deserved it for time devoted to following Jesus or for being chosen as a disciple. He did not wonder what he was going to get, like the other disciples who thought they might deserve something for giving up so much to follow Jesus. He began with a simple plea – "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!"

Blindness is not a sin. The sin is our refusal to admit our own blindness – the refusal to admit our own powerlessness to help ourselves.

That is the starting point. Bartimaeus is not crying out with a sense of deserving, but a sense of desperate hope. “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!”

So, then, he is ready in a way that James and John were not for Jesus’ question.

“What do you want me to do for you?”

“My teacher, let me see again.”

It was that simple. That basic. That clear. Right from the heart.

Then, healing. “Your faith has made you well.”

Then, with new sight, immense and overwhelming gratitude, utter devotion, and complete delight that carried him forward with ready feet to follow Jesus on the Way.

Can you imagine his gratitude, his wonder and joy? Can you? Have you known moments of some wonder and joy like this in your lives? Can you sense the leaping of his heart in amazement and delight, the giddiness of being restored to something he had lost that changed the world again for him?

And now, he is among the disciples – even along the Way with James and John who asked for places of honor, even among the disciples who wondered who would be the greatest and with Peter who wanted Jesus to stop talking about suffering and giving up himself.

Maybe their eyes opened a bit more, with Bartimaeus among them on the road.

These stories are about restoration, healing and true healing, true seeing.

And these stories are about a shift in our perspective – a flood of gratitude and wonder and awe – that compels us, that enchants and rivets us so deeply that we cannot do anything but give ourselves to God and to others all around us in overflowing thanks.

Those who go out weeping will come again rejoicing, carrying their sheaves. All together. All in song, along the road.

All on the Way – through the countryside, through different communities, people joining in along the journey, as we all move with our beloved Christ Jesus, onward to Jerusalem.