

Proper 25B “And they came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside.” Mark 10.46

Most every language that I am familiar with uses idioms to express some meaning or truth, but taken at face value they seem nonsensical. This is especially true when we use anatomical metaphors. To say that someone is hard-hearted or cold-hearted is not a statement regarding their cardio fitness. Likewise, the Hebrew language locates the emotion of love or desire in the liver and not in the heart which is where we might expect it to live. To say that someone is blind as a bat is not exactly what we mean. Bats use a kind of sonar to make their way through the night and to locate their prey. Humans may be blind, but they don't have sonar.

But humans can be blind in different ways, which raises the issue of metaphor again. For blindness is an affliction of the eyes. It is the relative or total failure of the eyes to relay images of the visible world to the brain. The healthy eye, the organ of sight, depends upon light to function properly. No light, no sight. So those people who are blind

are in darkness. But the blind are not the only ones who are in the dark. The prophet Isaiah wrote, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.” Who were these people? It was the Israelites who had forsaken the God of their fathers and had followed after false gods. They had done wickedly; they had killed the weak; they had turned the justice of the courts to injustice. They had become a stench in the nostrils of the God who had made them and had called them to be a special people to him, out of all the nations. While the sun did not cease to shine upon the round world in Isaiah’s day, his people were in darkness. And they would go out into the darkness of exile, in a far away land, until the Lord their God shined his light upon them and restored them.

But the Lord God did shine his light into the world. As John wrote, “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.” The light was shining brightly, brighter than the morning sun, and yet the world was blind to him, and his own people

could not see him. How strange! Are we to think that by saying this, John thought that Jesus was invisible? Certainly not. The people of Galilee had no problem seeing that Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph, stood before them and proclaimed to them the good news of the kingdom. But they would not believe in him, they could not see him with the eyes of faith, and so they were blind in a spiritual sense.

So, it is with this dual meaning of blindness, the physical and the spiritual, that Mark relates Jesus' healing blind Bartimaeus. This is the last healing miracle of Mark's Gospel, and it is the last event before Jesus enters triumphantly into his capitol as the king of the Jews. Throughout the Gospel Mark relates Jesus' miracles of powerful healing, manifesting his glory and his mercy upon the sick and suffering. Yet, by the middle of Mark's Gospel Jesus is focusing upon the enlightenment of his own disciples. They are in the dark about who he really is. So Mark relates that Jesus healed an unnamed blind man by spitting on his eyes. Then he asked Peter who he thought Jesus was. Peter responded, "You are the Messiah", but proceeded to show how blind he was by warning Jesus against going to his death. Jesus responded, "Get behind me Satan". Again, Jesus was

transfigured in glory in front of Peter, James and John and then foretold his impending death a second time. But the disciples occupy themselves by arguing about who will be the greatest in the kingdom of God. Then, Jesus foretold his death a third time, and James and John respond by asking to be given the thrones on either side of Jesus when his kingdom came on earth. Could the disciples see Jesus? Yes, but they were still blind. The eyes of their hearts were closed tight. Their faith was dark. They could not see Jesus for who he really was, so they stumbled and fell.

So, to conclude this theme and this passage, Mark relates how Jesus healed the blind beggar, Bartimaeus. Jesus had come down from Galilee by way of the Jordan River and had passed through the city of Jericho. From there it was 15 miles and a steep climb to enter into Jerusalem. A great crowd had gathered around this wonderworker from Nazareth, and there was excitement in the air. Could this really be the long expected king? Is he really going to march on Jerusalem? And as he passed that way, amid the roar of the crowd and the crush of the onlookers, the blind man sitting in the dirt and squalor along the side began to shout at the top of his lungs. “Jesus, Son of David,

have mercy on me!” Some in the crowd, perhaps even the disciples, began to urge him to silence. He shouldn’t bother such a busy and important man like Jesus. Keep it down, and go about your begging for spare change. But Bartimaeus would have nothing of it! Their rebuke only made him shout louder, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy upon me!” No one but the demons, and that befuddled Peter had called him by such glorious titles: Son of David, Messiah, the Christ. This was a noteworthy expression of faith. Jesus stopped and called blind Bartimaeus to him. “What do you want me to do for you”, Jesus asked him.

Oh, what great encouragement we should find here in these words of Jesus, for he said to the crowds, “Call him.” Call him who was blind, broken, poor and downtrodden. Call him who had nothing more than the spare change of travelers and despised by the crowds. Call him who had nothing, not even the common decency to keep his mouth closed and not draw attention to himself. No, but Jesus says, “Call him”. How can this be? Jesus said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” How encouraging it is to those of us who know life’s

greatest sorrows, its temptations and persecutions? How joyous it is to those who know their own blindness to hear the voice of the savior calling them. For he is full of mercy to all those who will call upon his name.

So we see that Jesus called Bartimaeus. But what was his response to Jesus' call? He cast off his cloak, he sprang up and he came to Jesus. He cast off his cloak! Jericho is in the desert, and is normally too hot for anything but the lightest of clothing. What then was he doing with his cloak? He was begging for coins and catching his livelihood in it. Much like the beggars of our own day use hats or cups, this man had his cloak spread out in front of him to catch what money he could from passersby. But he would not let it keep him from Jesus. We may scoff at this and wonder why would he? But this was all he had known. This was his livelihood and his only possession. His cloak was his shelter from the elements, his net to catch his meal, his very life line. And yet he threw it aside lest it keep him from his goal. The Lord had called him and he sprang up. The Lord had called to Abraham and he had left all behind and crossed the desert to a land he had never seen. The Lord had called Mary in the voice of the angel

Gabriel, and she had trusted in his promises, not fearing the shame. Matthew the tax-collector had heard the Lord's voice and had gotten up and had left his money behind. Each of these, righteous men and women, had heard the voice of the Lord and had responded in faith. Bartimaeus sprang up and joined in their ranks of faithful ones!

Should we not respond in the same way to the savior's voice? Does he not call each of us to come and follow him? Yet each of us is so encumbered with the entanglements of our lives. Our husbands, our wives, our children and our grandchildren; the cares of this world; the bills to pay and worrying about "the future". But we are surrounded by a great crowd who are going the way of Jesus. We have Abraham, Mary, Matthew, Andrew and Bartimaeus! Even so, the Letter to the Hebrew's says, "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith." It is he that has called us and it is he that is leading us on the way. We cannot fear for the future, for the future is his. We cannot fear for today for he has

given us everything in it! Instead, we must throw away from us anything that will keep us from following him!

So we see in Bartimaeus, who could see Jesus with the eyes of faith, an example for each of us to imitate. We must imitate him in his humility. There are none here today that have experienced the crushing weight of poverty the way that Bartimaeus did. He begged for his very subsistence. He had nothing to offer Jesus in payment for his attention, and yet he cried out for that mercy. Even so let us approach the throne of grace offering nothing but our lives. Let us come to him broken and repentant, knowing that he alone holds the key to eternal life.

Next, we must imitate him in his perseverance. He shouted at the top of his lungs though he could not see where Jesus was. He shouted though the crowds around him told him to be silent. He shouted though he had no expectation that Jesus would even seek out a man in such a low condition. But he shouted and shouted until Jesus could resist him no longer. So we must shout and we must pray. We must lay siege to heave on our knees. If your prayer life is like mine it is

cold and half-hearted. We manage a word here and there, but we do not pound ceaselessly upon the gates of heaven until we be let in. And what is the cause of this, but our own faithlessness? If we were confident that there was no other source of rescue, then we would like Bartimaeus shout until we had salvation from our Lord's hands.

And finally, we must imitate Bartimaeus' gratitude. For he humble himself, and he did cry out. But when he had received what he had asked for he praised God and followed Jesus on the way. His was no fox hole conversion. He did not pray to God in his moment of need, making vows and promises and then forget to pay what he owed. No! He had given his life to Jesus and he would not take it back. He got up and he followed him in the way. What way was that? It was the way of discipleship. It was the way to Jerusalem and certain death. It was the way of the cross. Let us, like Bartimaeus always have the kindness of Jesus Christ ever written before our enlightened eyes. Let us not grow cold in faith, but follow him in the way.