

On the Way

Sermon 117 | Greystone Baptist Church | October 24, 2021

Mark 10:46-52

You've probably heard the phrase "the cobbler's children have no shoes." It comes from an old tale about a shoemaker (a cobbler) who spends so much time making shoes for the clientele that there is no time to make sure his own children have shoes. I won't ask you to confess if the essence of this tale is true in your own lives, but I will confess to you today that it *can be true* of pastors with their children. My best guess is that something happens in seminary, when we learn just how complex *all* the stories of the Bible are, when we are required to learn just how sordid the history of Christianity is, when we learn new theologies, often the lessons we learned as children seem inadequate and even at times inappropriate to teach our children.

So if you've ever known a "PK" who lived up to the stereotype, have mercy on them, it's probably not all their fault.

In my house there may be some of the "cobbler" situation, but there is one faith tradition that Mia and I have grown to love. At night, when she's laying in bed and we're ending our conversation, sometimes she'll ask me to sing. "What song do you want me to sing?" I'll ask. "You know, the one we sing together," she'll say; and I know exactly which one she's talking about.

*Somebody's hurtin' my brother
and it's gone on
far too long.*

*Yes it's gone on [far too long]
Yes it's gone on [far too long]*

*Somebody's hurtin' my brother
and it's gone on far too long,*

And I won't keep silent anymore.

I first learned this song on a bus that I shared with 54 pilgrims in the summer of 2017 as we travelled through the deep south together revisiting important sites of the Civil Rights movement. You've probably heard me talk about this trip before because it was one of the most transformative experiences of my life. 54 pilgrims, black and white Baptists from Charlotte, North Carolina, traveled together telling stories, reading scripture, singing songs, and learning pieces of our country's history. Much of what I learned in the museums and on the bus was new to me. Although the history was real and relevant, it was not taught in school as part of any curriculum. I suppose I could have visited the museums on my own, but I'd never chosen to embark on that kind of personal, educational journey.

The guidebook for the pilgrimage included several pages of freedom songs and spirituals that functioned as a soundtrack of the movement. As we sang, I looked around and noticed that though neither I nor my church members knew the lyrics or the melodies, half the bus knew them all by heart.

As the wheels rolled on deeper and deeper into the South, we picked up the tunes and began to sing along. By the time the journey was over, we all knew the words, the tunes, and the historical realities that gave meaning and depth to the songs we sang. In a way, the music told the stories best – better than words strung together as poem or prose.

When Justin and I returned home from the trip, Mia – who had been staying with grandparents – wanted to know where we'd been and more importantly *why* we had been anywhere without her. The honest truth is, there weren't any words to adequately sum up the experience. So we told her we'd been traveling and learning about our history, and that the main thing we wanted to remember from this trip was that sometimes we just have to speak up when we see that people are being left out and mistreated.

The trip made me realize that too often I had been like the disciples in the 10th chapter of Mark. Asking the wrong questions without even recognizing it; meanwhile, the Bartimaeus' of the world were crying out for healing. In today's reading the focus shifts from where it was last week. It moves from the disciples, the congregation (so to speak) to the blind man named Bartimaeus. The word "Bar" means "son" in the original language; and the rest of his name, "Timaues," can be translated in two very different ways. In some readings, Timaues means sinner. Placing the fault of Bartimaeus' blindness on his parents' moral shortcomings.

For the blind man to be called Bartimaeus – with this understanding – would be very typical, very basic. But another way to translate that word, *timaues*, causes the original audience to rethink any pre-drawn conclusions about why this man was blind. Timaues comes from a Latin name meaning, *honor*. So, is this man a son of sin or son of honor?

I guess we'll never know for sure.

In any case, we meet Bartimaeus on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem where Jesus and the disciples are making their way. A crowd forms around them marking the continued escalation of conflict between Jesus and the authorities. Almost as quickly as Bartimaeus appears in the story, the disciples disappear. Their silence is easy to overlook.

Bartimaeus cries out to Jesus, "Have mercy on me!"

Many who heard turned to the blind beggar and "sternly ordered him to be quiet."

But according to the Gospel, Bartimaeus, "Cried out even more loudly"

At this, Jesus stopped and called the man to come near.

With the disciples still absent from the narrative, those who had ordered Bartimaeus' silence were the ones to summon him to Jesus. When the two were together Jesus says to Bartimaeus: *What do you want me to do for you?*

Read alone, this question is little more than what it seems on the surface, but in context with the verses before, the story where James and John come to Jesus asking: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And knowing that after hearing their request, Jesus' response was to tell them that they didn't know what they were asking for, they couldn't understand the gravity of the situation... here, Jesus' seems to imply that just as much as the disciples did *not* understand the Gospel, Bartimaeus understood it completely. This point is further underscored by the fact that while the disciples remain unmentioned, unnamed, and perhaps unaccounted for, Bartimaeus, having regained his sight, follows Jesus on the way. It is not because of any doctrinal confession, not because he lived his life a certain way, but rather because he refused to quiet his pain in order to cry out for God's mercy that Bartimaeus is healed and then becomes a disciple.

He follows Jesus on the way.

But I am not convinced that Bartimaeus is the only one who is healed on the way from Jericho to Jerusalem.

I can't help but notice the silence of the twelve disciples as they encounter Bartimaeus. I wonder what they were thinking and feeling as the plot unfolded around them. Were they annoyed that this man interrupted their journey? Were they ready to just walk, to travel in peace and spend some quality time with Jesus? Maybe they felt it was their turn to rest in his presence, to soak up the wisdom, the love, that just seemed to flow forth. Were they overwhelmed from their previous conversation with him, the one where Jesus told them they didn't quite understand. Maybe they just didn't have the brain space to process everything that was happening.

That is something we can definitely understand, right? Cognitive and emotional fatigue?

Sometimes when that kind of fatigue sets in we are tempted to retreat. We want to avoid the difficult conversation. We say "no" to the invitation to participate in the mission project or the advocacy initiative. We quietly fade into the background because we're just overwhelmed and exhausted. If in last week's reading the disciples were looking for a "pause" button, this week what they want is a "time out."

And *that* is something all of us can understand.

The problem is, Jesus presses on.

He hears the stubborn cries of Bartimaeus which stop him in his tracks. In opposition to those who would rather silence the man who was suffering, he summons him to his side, heals him, makes him whole, and then invites him to join him on the way. Bartimaeus becomes a disciple.

The healing is also available for the others, for those who have been with Jesus all along, those who were silent or absent from the scene... they too are still invited to join Jesus on the way – And though they don't realize it... they also need for their eyes to be opened, to recover their sight so that they might see Bartimaeus in their midst and begin to amplify (not silence) his voice.

I know that this kind of healing is possible and very much needed because I have experienced it (and continue to experience it) myself... I have seen Christ in the face of my sisters and brothers as they have been my teachers. None more transformative than on that Pilgrim bus...

*Somebody's hurtin' my sister
And it's gone on far too long...*

And I'll bet that you know what I am talking about because you have met Christ in your own experiences as well...

in Helena, Arkansas
in the Welcome House
at the Clothing Closet
at the SECU house
at Neighbor Health
at Buddy Break
in REI training
or delivering for Meals on Wheels

When our lives intersect with those whose voices are too often shushed, silenced, and sternly ordered to be quiet, we have an opportunity not only to offer healing, but to receive it for ourselves as well.

My eyes were opened on that pilgrim bus all those years ago; and I began to see the world differently. In those holy moments on that bus, I was healed. We all were. Because Bartimaeus was crying out despite the decades of silencing. Finally, in those holy moments, eyes and ears and hearts became open to one another.

And on the way home we sang all together, with 55 voices that sounded like one.

So that's how I knew that the one thing I wanted my daughter to know about our time away from her, one faith lesson I knew she needed to know was this:

*Somebody's hurtin' my sister,
And it's gone on (far too long)
...and we won't be silent anymore.*