

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Bartimaeus’s Persistence”

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Mark 10:46-52

Bartimaeus is one of my favorite people in the Bible. He’s wonderful! He’s also miserable. He’s blind. As challenging as that is today, it was far worse then. If you were blind, people assumed it was because you or your parents had done something to earn it. So, there was little compassion for the blind and few opportunities for employment. There were no government safety nets, no food stamps or federally subsidized housing or unemployment checks. Many people who were blind ended up working the streets, begging. This is precisely where we find Bartimaeus, sitting next to the road that leads out of Jericho. But even among beggars, Bartimaeus is at a disadvantage. Think of it: without eye contact, there is no beggar easier to ignore than a blind beggar.

Bartimaeus is doing the best he can and has chosen his spot carefully. Jericho is the last city on the way to Jerusalem, and thousands were starting to converge on Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Bartimaeus has plopped himself down outside the city gates next to the main road that leads to Jerusalem. He’s working that lucrative crowd of Passover pilgrims, religious tourists with money in their bags and a conscience in their hearts . . . thousands of them.

As it turns out, Jesus of Nazareth is among the many going to Jerusalem, but not to make a sacrifice; He’s going there to be the sacrifice . . . to be the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This is why He has come. There’s a crowd surrounding Jesus. It was customary for distinguished Rabbis to teach as they made such journeys.

The city of Jericho with its famous walls and busy market lay behind them and in front is that infamous road passing through rugged countryside. It’s the road that was impossible to police, with all its crags and canyons and hideout places for gangs of thieves. It’s the road Jesus used in his story of the Good Samaritan. It’s the road where it was safest to travel in a crowd. This is the road next to which Bartimaeus is sitting, just outside the gates of Jericho.

Bartimaeus can’t see but he can tell another crowd is shuffling by. One man is speaking; the others are all listening. He asks and someone tells him it’s Jesus of Nazareth. Bartimaeus knows just enough about Jesus to start making a great big fuss. “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me! Jesus, have mercy. Jesus!” But the crowd was trying to listen to Jesus. Even under the best of circumstances it’s hard enough to hear Him. So the noise of this beggar irritates the crowd. Little babies making a fuss can be excused, but not a grown man. The crowd turns on him. The text says, “Many rebuked Bartimaeus, telling him to be silent.” So we have Bartimaeus yelling at Jesus and the crowd yelling at Bartimaeus.

Instead of acquiescing to the crowd, Bartimaeus turns up the volume. “Son of David, mercy!” He will not be put off; he will not be brushed aside. He’s blind, but he has a voice and knows how to use it. He’s not going to let this opportunity pass by. He ignores the scorn of the crowd and keeps on yelling at Jesus.

Whenever I think of Bartimaeus, I think of that woman sitting behind me at Lambeau field. We were at the south end-zone, and the opposing offense was in the red zone. It was third and goal and the stadium erupted with a wall of volume. This woman behind me, also stood up and let loose. I’ve never heard anything like it. It was a gift. She had a voice like a howitzer.

It seems Bartimaeus has a voice like that and is demanding the attention of Jesus. “Call him” Jesus says. Now the same people who were just telling Bartimaeus to shut up are now saying, “Why are you just sitting there? Get up man; he’s calling you!” The text says Bartimaeus “sprang up” from the ground. He is guided to the nucleus of the crowd. “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asks. Bartimaeus knows what he wants. “Rabbi, I want to see!” “Go” Jesus says, “your faith has healed you”. In Mark, whenever the Lord says something like that, we know what the next word will be. “Immediately.” Immediately he recovered his sight. It’s called divine fiat. God commands, and immediately, it happens.

Jesus says to him, “Your faith has made you well.” Now that’s interesting because we don’t know anything about Bartimaeus’ faith. All we know is that when Bartimaeus learns Jesus is near, he gets all loud and demanding. And when he’s told to shut up, he turns up the volume and becomes very persistent.

Maybe persistence is a greater part of faith than we would think. Usually, we think of faith as intellectual assent to ideas about Jesus. It’s subscribing to this or that article of faith. But in the Bible, it seems faith is about not giving up. Faith is not getting discouraged just because those cultural currents against us are so very strong. Faith is carrying on

with the fight even when you think you're going to lose. Faith is persistence and boldness and tenacity. Faith is that one person turning up the volume when the crowd is telling him to shut up. Faith is the remnant that will still speak God's truth though the conformity police snivel with disapproval. Psalm 27, "Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident" (v. 3). Maybe that's what we Christians need today, a good dose of confident persistence. A little more tenacity: a greater willingness to take some risks and speak up. Christians, especially of the LCMS ilk, put a lot of value on quiet strength and humility. But Bartimaeus knows there are times when you have to raise Cain. Had Bartimaeus caved into the crowd, he would have gone to the grave blind. Maybe part of faith then, is not being thwarted or shaped or silenced by secular values, but persistently clinging to the hope and truth we have in Christ.

Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent cannot. There are lots of unsuccessful men and women with talent. Genius will not. There are unrewarded geniuses right here in Watertown. Education will not replace persistence. The world is full of well-educated people with few prospects and tons of debt. Athletic aptitude will not replace persistence. The desire to win means nothing without persistence in training and conditioning. Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Persistence, determination, tenacity, stubbornness . . . it's like a superpower. It's the right stuff as far as the Lord is concerned. It gets things done. It solves problems. It invents and improves. It wins contests.

Strength. Perseverance. Tenacity. Persistence. Or should we just call that faith? Whatever it is, the Lord likes it and rewards it and invites it. He tells the story of a widow who keeps pestering the judge until he gives her what she requests. He tells the story of a man who wakes up his friend at midnight asking for three loaves of bread because he has an unexpected guest. It isn't because of their friendship, but because of the boldness of the request that the man gets up and gives him as much as he needs (Lk. 11). And, of course there's the story of Abraham interceding for Sodom. Six times he intervenes. In my house, that's called nagging. Whatever it is, the Lord welcomes it and rewards it. "There's a time to be silent, but also a time to speak" (Eccl. 3:7). There is a time to be quiet and respectful, but Bartimaeus also teaches us there's a time to stand firm and be persistent.

Bartimaeus yelled his head off and Jesus told him, "Go, your faith has made you well." But did you notice? Bartimaeus didn't go. Instead, the text says Bartimaeus "followed Jesus on the way." Seems Jesus has himself a new disciple, one with persistence. That's a great arrow to have in the quiver.

Bartimaeus is following Jesus who is following His Father's will to travel that road to the cross. Why? Because Jesus saw our great and desperate need. He saw how our sin has reaped havoc and devastation on our world, our nation, our community, our families, and on us as individuals. He sees our tragedies, our accidents, our blindness. He sees disorder and death coming to each of us, but because he loves us, he stirred up his power and grace and came down to meet us where we are, to take on our sin and death as his own. Our God has a stubborn and persistent streak as well, and it is very Good News that he mates that mulishness with a great big heart full of love for us.

The Lord's persistence makes ours look like child's play. He taught that God is like a shepherd who has 99 out of 100 sheep present and accounted for. But for the Good Shepherd, that is absolutely unacceptable. So he leaves the 99 in the open country and will not rest until he tracks that one down and puts it on his shoulders and brings it back to the fold. The arithmetic of that parable makes no sense to us unless we think of ourselves as that one that is lost, or your daughter that is wandering about and vulnerable.

Jesus also taught that God is like an old woman who loses one coin, but because she is a penny-wise, obstinate old woman, she turns the house upside down and inside out. She's a persistent one. She will not stop until she finds it. Jesus says the Kingdom of God is like that. It's not acceptable to be losing hard earned money. You are the hard-earned people of God. He's not going to lose you.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, on his way to a cross. It's just fifteen miles away now. No one else really wants to hear about it, but Jesus knows what awaits Him. And He's not turning back. There's a certain tenacity and persistence in His stride. He knows this is why He has come.

And when the friends of Jesus try to dissuade Him from going to Jerusalem, they soon learned their efforts would be futile. Try as they might, they could not delay or redirect Him. No one could change His mind. There never was one so strong and obstinate and persistent as our Lord when He's heading toward His cross, because that's what love does. It fights and struggles and prays and makes sacrifice. It does not give up.

This is why He was born. He will not be thwarted. He will not be turned back. He will not be quieted. Not even death and a sealed tomb will silence Him. Thanks be to God. Amen.