

What do you want me to do for you?

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October 14, 2007

Mark 10: 46-52

Psalm 30, Psalm 142: 1-5

“What do you want me to do about it? *Have mercy, have mercy.* All day long -- *have mercy, have pity.* As if I can do something for these people.”

One might expect this to be Jesus' response; any normal person would lose patience with the shouting and pawing at him. But Jesus, wise beyond his years stops again and asks, “What do you want me to do for you?”

This morning we begin a three-week series on healing and Jesus asks each of us: “What do you want me to do for you?”

Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, the Hebrew version of Timaeus junior, is blind. How long has he has been sitting by the side of the road outside Jericho? Long enough that everyone knows his name. He calls out, recognizing Jesus for who he is, “Son of David, have mercy on me.” But Jesus walks on past while the other onlookers shush him. Bartimaeus persists in his hollering. Jesus stops, saying, “Okay, have him come here.” Bartimaeus does not hesitate to get up, and throw off his wrap, perhaps all that he has. He goes to Jesus. We aren't told if he does this on his own or if he has help. But he goes to Jesus, somehow. Jesus asks Bartimaeus, “What do you want me to do for you?”

“My teacher, I want to see.” Jesus replies, as he does so often, “Your faith has saved you.” And Bartimaeus can see. With this new vision, he becomes a follower of Jesus, walking along with him to Jerusalem.

TWO POINTS, #1

In my reading of this story this time two things jumped out at me. Maybe two different things struck you but I get to go first. The first thing I noticed is that Jesus asks the man to come to him. He is invited to participate in his own healing.

Jesus does not stop in front of him. Jesus asks Bartimaeus to come to him. In his wisdom, Jesus has the expectation that the man will somehow be a participant in his own healing. Jesus does not wave a wand over the man; he does not walk past and say, “It is done.” He seeks interaction with the man and asks him what it is he wants Jesus to do.

This week I watched the movie *The Secret*. It is also about naming and asking for what you want. You might have heard about this movie on Oprah or some other talk show. There are some things to affirm here; it encourages positive thinking and stresses

that people be clear about their aspirations. You remember Norman Vincent Peale? *The Secret* is sort of a secular “Power of Positive Thinking,” updated for the 21st century.

But, (you knew there was going to be a but) it is also supremely self-centered. What do I want and how is the universe going to give it to me? (One “expert” in the movie says that “if we say what we want then the universe will realign itself to us.”) Most of the desires cited entail money or sex. While I am repelled by the self-centered greed encouraged here it is not that different from some of the preaching that is heard in churches all over the world.

The prosperity gospel. Its mission statement might be put this way, “God desires to bless you beyond your wildest dreams and wildest expectations.” (“The Prosperity Gospel in Africa” -- Paul Gifford, *Christian Century*, July 10, 2007) And of course God also desires for you to put a big chunk of that money you are dreaming about into the offering plate of that preacher’s church.

Is the prosperity gospel or *The Secret* really any different from the question Jesus asks the blind man, “What do you want me to do for you?” Well, of course it is.

In the scene immediately preceding our story in Mark 10 Jesus asks that same question, “What do you want me to do for you?” The answer is quite different.

Brothers James and John come up to Jesus and say, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he says, “What do you want me to do for you?” They reply, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” Jesus tries to clarify with them that they are certain this is what they want. To have the same experiences, the same baptism as he has? “Yes, yes, we can do it,” they say. Jesus tells them, “The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” The rest of the disciples hear about this audacious request and Jesus lets them know that they should just calm down already.

Jesus calls all of them to him and says, “You know how among the Gentiles those who exercise authority are domineering and arrogant; those “great ones” know how to make their own importance felt. But it can’t be like that with you. Anyone among you who aspires to greatness must serve the rest.”

So aren’t James and John, and later the rest of the disciples, doing this just right (and they didn’t even watch the movie.) They are asking for what they want. They are very clear in their desire and they have a vision of what “the universe” should give them.

And Jesus is equally clear that they have it all wrong. The fame and fortune, the self-centered brush with glory they desire is not his to give.

But then Jesus gives a blind man sight. It is one of those times when the gospel writer is trying to be subtle and obvious at the same time. The writer of Mark is showing us who the blind ones really are. In MattheW, Jesus heals a blind man, and the punch line is that the true blind ones are the Pharisees. Mark tells us that it is the disciples who are in fact blind. Jesus is about to enter Jerusalem. He is in his last week of life and they still don't understand what he is about, they still don't understand his power or his message. But the blind man, acting in faith, asking for mercy, sees clearly, with his heart as well as with his eyes.

POINT #2

The second thing I noticed in this story is that Jesus doesn't presume to know what the man needs. He listens and allows Bartimaeus to articulate that for himself. When Jesus first sees this man he is surely smart enough to realize the man is blind; what he needs is to see. But Jesus doesn't automatically grant Bartimaeus his sight. He asks Bartimaeus to come to him, to take some action toward healing. Jesus also doesn't presume to know what it is Bartimaeus wants or needs. Bartimaeus might want forgiveness, he is after all shouting for mercy. He might want a child to take care of him in his old age. But when in faith he asks for his vision, in some mysterious way it is given to him.

When it comes to pain, sickness, war and dysfunction in the world we who deem ourselves well often make the mistake of thinking we know what would be best for those whom we look on as unhealthy. We presume to know what will be best for the other person or even the whole country or culture. But without listening to those people we often do not know what they really want, what would be most helpful.

Take Iraq for example. Someone, or several someones, in the U.S. government presumed that if they could only get rid of Sadaam Hussein, tyrant that he was, the Iraqi people would be happy, liberated and work together to rebuild their society. We know what has happened over the past five years. What might have happened if someone had asked, "What do you want us to do for you?"

Another ugly example is the church's treatment of gay and lesbian people. A whole swath of Christianity is sure that it is obvious what gay people want: to be healed of their sexual orientation. But when one speaks to a happy, healthy gay person she or he does not ask to be healed of their sexuality. Instead you might hear them ask that other Christians be healed of their fear, healed of their homophobia, that society be healed of heterosexism.

Or look at the deaf community. There are those who would say that if you cannot hear then you are to be pitied. And you must need healing. But the strong and articulate deaf community represented by Gallaudet University would say emphatically, "No." (in sign language) "We have our own culture, our own language and we are happy. We do not need to be like you in order to be whole. We have our own definition of wholeness and you need to understand us."

For Jesus to stop and take a moment to ask Bartimeous what he wants is not only respectful but counter cultural, for most cultures and times. Wise people listen carefully to whom they are talking and try to hear what is really being said.

So why did Jesus deny the disciples but give sight to the blind man? I believe it has to do their motivation as well as their restoration. What the disciples were asking for was self-centered and pride centered. It was something that would split up their community, would create separation, anger and disagreement. When Jesus heals people they are restored back to the community. They are no longer alone, the lost coin, the lost sheep or the lost son. They have returned and there is rejoicing. The healed ones are invited to become followers of “the Jesus way” by including others, by passing on the healing. Jesus commands his disciples to go and heal, to spread the good news.

As we look at the world today, desperately in need of healing, how do we know what the real need is? Can we who live in this country of wealth and relative freedom, begin to understand what is needed by our sisters and brothers in Congo or Colombia, in Iraq or Afghanistan, even in Anacostia or Annapolis? What about the earth and her needs? How do we bring healing to the environment that has so long been abused and neglected? How do we learn to listen for the real need, whether people or the earth?

Jesus gives us the answer when he tells the disciples “whoever would be great among you will be a servant.” This is hardly the prosperity gospel or *The Secret* we were hoping for. The difference between *The Secret* and the way of Jesus is that Jesus says we are to do this with each other. Serving is not to be done by one person alone. The self is not the center. We are to love God and love our neighbors and we do it in community. The disciples never did quite get this message until after Jesus was gone. When Jesus died things took on new meaning. The early church understood like the disciples never quite did. And if hindsight gives 20/20 vision then we ought to see quite clearly by now: we are to live in community, loving God and neighbor and serving one another.

Living a serving life need not mean misery. Living in the blessed community that seeks to participate in healing is a gift. Providing hospitality, listening with an open heart, joyful laughter; these are healing for those who are in the community and for those whom the community serves.

As we seek to be part of healing the earth and its peoples let us listen and serve, loving mercy, doing justice and walking humbly with our God.