

“Leave It All Behind”
October 27, 2024
Scripture: Jeremiah 31:7-9; Mark 10:46-52

This story about Bartimaeus is possibly my favorite story in Mark’s Gospel. This is the shortest gospel, of course, and probably was a source for at least two of the others, Matthew and Luke. And it’s very down to earth and gritty, so I like this gospel a lot. But this story is especially compelling to me. Jesus has a lot of personal encounters in the gospels. I find those to be more informative, really, than his parables. The parables are helpful for abstract principles and insights, but the personal encounters give us a flavor of Jesus’ personality. Think of the Syrophenician woman or the woman at the well. Jesus engages those folks directly and even when he’s tempted to dismiss them, he finds them intriguing and can’t help but interact with them.

Here we have a blind man begging at the gate of Jericho. And the first thing we should notice about him is: he has a name. How many people seeking healing from Jesus actually have a name? Almost none. It’s always just “a man” or “a woman;” sometimes we get a little description but seldom a name. So for Bartimaeus to be named is significant. It should make us sit up and pay attention because something special is about to happen.

We don’t know how Bartimaeus become blind; we can assume he wasn’t born in that condition which means his station as a beggar is something he had to take to survive. And he knows what he’s doing. He knows when there’s a procession going by he needs to get their attention. The gate at Jericho on the eve of Passover would have been a pretty busy place for beggars. Large groups would have gone through on their way to Jerusalem with the other pilgrims. And they would have been in a charitable mood, I imagine, going to Jerusalem to celebrate a holy season. So it makes sense that Bartimaeus would start to shout.

What doesn’t make much sense is the disciples’ response. They try to shut him up. They see their job as protecting Jesus from unwanted distractions. They think they’re the gatekeepers who can stand between Jesus and people in need. But Bartimaeus won’t relent. He shouts even louder, and Jesus does the unthinkable; he stops everything and calls him over. Why not just have one of his followers take care of him? A celebrity today would do that. If Jesus were some Roman authority he’d just have a flunky give the beggar a few coins, maybe, depending on what mood he was in. But Jesus calls the man over to see him face to face.

And that’s where this story really takes a strange turn. We’re told “throwing off his cloak he sprang up and came to Jesus.” What do you suppose Bartimaeus’ cloak meant to him? He’s a beggar, homeless with no one to look after him. His cloak holds everything he owns. His whole life is kept in it. Anything he might have managed to collect from other people walking by is in his cloak. He can’t live without it. But he throws it off and springs to his feet. If you’re a blind person in a crowd of people, the last thing you would do is jump up suddenly without knowing who you might knock over or who might knock you back down. But one word from Jesus and suddenly Bartimaeus can leave it all behind.

This is a story about hope and trust. When we look at our own condition in the world, the circumstances that limit our prospects or determine our status, the possibility of change can seem remote. Sometimes the disappointments and losses pile up and all we can see ahead is misery and grief. Hope for something better, something more shrivels up within us when day after day we're faced with the same limitations, carrying the weight of our circumstances, clinging to what little we can claim as our own and guarding it for all we're worth. Like Bartimaeus we're all just sitting at the gate shouting into the void for some tiny crumb of attention. But unlike him, we give up way too easily. In our blindness we're unable to hope for something more and unwilling to trust enough to jump to our feet and leave it all behind.

That's a challenge that runs through the whole Bible. In Jeremiah we hear words of hope just as the people are beginning a period of exile in Babylon. At their lowest moment, when everything around them says they've been abandoned by God, Jeremiah holds out the hope of return and restoration. Can they trust that? Can they trust God enough to carry them through this trauma and back to a place of healing? If that has any chance of happening for them, then they'll need to leave a lot behind. They'll need to leave behind their fears and disappointments, their distrust and apprehension. In spite of all they've lost, Jeremiah is convinced God will restore them. In spite of everything that frightens us, in spite of the uncertainty on our horizon, Jeremiah tells us God will restore us, will make us whole.

In the confidence of that promise, we're encouraged to act, to jump up and move forward. The thing about trauma and anxiety is it paralyzes us. We get stuck sitting at the gate or languishing in exile because we're afraid to move. Not all the Israelites returned from Babylon; some stayed behind unable or unwilling to make the journey back. And not everyone Jesus calls is able to jump up and toss aside the past to follow him. It takes work to leave it all behind.

What that work looks like for each of us is personal and particular, but what it looks like collectively we saw an example on Friday. On Friday, President Joe Biden traveled to the Gila River Indian Community in Arizona and issued a formal apology for our government's use of Indian boarding schools to decimate Native American culture for 150 years in an effort of forced assimilation. He referred to the government-run Indian boarding schools as one of the "most horrific chapters in American history that most Americans don't even know about," and called it "a sin on our souls." Native people traveled from as far as Alaska to hear the apology. According to reports many gathered in tears even before President Biden spoke. One woman, named Carletta Tilousi, a member of the Havasupai and Hopi tribes, said his words made her think about her relatives who had been traumatized by that experience: "It brought the pain back to me. We need to begin the healing. The apology is the first step."

The work it took just to get to that moment was immense. In our own area, at the site of the Thomas Indian School in Cattaraugus County, researchers are still finding unmarked graves of students who died there. We can't undo that. We can't make the trauma of those events disappear, but we can work toward healing and find ways to leave it behind us. Bartimaeus knew exactly what he was throwing aside when he flung off his cloak. We need to know what was done and face the consequences of it before we can leave it behind.

God's promise to restore Israel, Jesus' willingness to hear and see Bartimaeus that restores his sight, give us affirmation of the possibility of change. We can find healing for our souls and be transformed if we're willing to accept God's offer, follow Jesus on the way, and do the work needed to lift us from the darkness of despair into the light of hope. We can leave all of it behind us, all the pain, all the grief, all the fear and move forward into hope and joy. We can have our eyes opened, we can be led back from exile, we can spring up and throw away the cloak of misery that weighs us down and find healing for our brokenness, be made whole again. That's what God offers us in Christ. When we follow Jesus on the way, we follow him to the cross where we face the world's pain and enter its suffering. We offer up our own despair and put it to death so we can rise to new life. Resurrection is found by going into the depths, into exile, into blindness. By confessing who we are and what we've done, we begin the journey back from death to life.

God is calling each of us to make that journey. God is inviting you to come home from exile, to throw away your cloak of despair and spring to your feet at Jesus' call. What's holding you back? What's keeping you stuck sitting at the gate begging for crumbs? Let it go. Let go of your pain, your fear, your anxiety, your guilt; let it all go and take heart. He's calling you; he sees you. Jump up and face him! And leave it all behind.

Amen