

Thirtieth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Bartimaeus

October 28, 2018

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“Your faith has healed you,” Jesus says to the blind man. But just what was the blind man’s faith?

To start with, it was a faith that would give Jesus cause to pay attention to him. Which is more than we can say of those around him. For when the blind man - a beggar no different than any panhandler we might run into downtown pestering people for a handout - tries to get Jesus’ attention others scold him for making a nuisance of himself. For them this is a big deal, a chance for everyone to see and hear for themselves the prophet everyone’s been talking about.

Why can’t he behave? Why can’t he do as he’s told? Why can’t he stay out of the way?

But the Gospel story puts the shoe on the other foot. This blind beggar isn’t the nobody everyone takes him for. He’s the hero of the story. We are even told his name, Bartimaeus. In the story, it’s everyone else whose making a nuisance of themselves by trying to hush him up. We who are listening want to ask, who do they think they are? Why can’t they behave? Why can’t they stay out of the way?

Well, why can’t they? Why can’t we? I’m no exception. I look away when I see a panhandler standing at a traffic light, or walking toward me on the sidewalk. It’s not so much that we look down on them, it’s more that we look away from them, we try to pretend that we don’t see them, that we don’t hear them, that they are a blight on the cityscape. What those living on the street need even more than a handout is what Jesus gives Bartimaeus right off the bat—his attention, recognition. He does not shirk back, he addresses him, if only for a moment, he responds to him as a person rather than a problem.

And it turns out that what the beggar really wants, is not a handout after all. What he really wants is to see. And I would add to be seen, to matter, to someone. Because if he does not matter to anyone, how can he even matter to himself? How can he matter at all?

Catholic Charities has two approaches to people on the street. For those serious about turning their lives around, they have built and remodeled a number of apartment buildings downtown to provide housing and wrap around services to enable the down and out to climb up and back into society. For example that's what Hope House does. But they also have the House of Charity for those not yet able to help themselves. There you can be drunk, you can be high, all they require is that you treat everyone with the same respect with which they are treating you. The house of charity also offers services to help people to turn their life around. But participation in their services are not mandatory. Nobody has to even be willing to work on themselves.

The two approaches are in tension, but they are really complementary. Hope House, Women's Hearth, Bach Haven, Hanson Haven and a dozen other havens provide housing and help for those struggling to help themselves. But the House of Charity is there for those who can't or won't help themselves. They serve more like a band-aid than a cure. They do not expect to solve the problem, they are there to attend to the problem, whether or not it can be solved.

Spokane needs both. We are Our Lady of the Lake, we support both financially. Every year I have Jesuit Volunteers who work at House of Charity come to my Freshman Honors service learning course addressing marginal populations in and around Spokane. I always ask them, what percentage of your clientele have a mental illness? The most striking and likely accurate answer I got was "100%-- If a mental illness did not lead them to the streets, life on the streets gave them one. Whether its schizophrenia or bipolar, abuse, depression or addiction, if they didn't already suffer from one or more of these, they do now.

"The poor you shall have with you always" There will always be those who fall through the cracks or who even jump into those cracks. We may know relatives who are or have been on the streets. I had an Honors student once, who had lived in a car with her mother earlier in her life. For there to be winners in life, there will inevitably also be losers. The measure of a community is not how few are down and out. If that were true, the richest zip codes would be the best communities in the country. No, the measure of a community is how they deal with those who are down and out in their midst. Catholic charities has a saying, "we do not serve the poor because they are Catholic, we serve the poor because we are Catholic."

Jesus commends Bartimaeus for his faith. But the faith that saved him was also Jesus' own faith in him. We all have parts of ourselves we are not proud of, parts of ourselves we want to look away from--parts of ourselves that don't want to behave, and that just will not stay out of the way but insist on making a nuisance of themselves in our lives.

Jesus however does get the beggar to behave. In fact he transforms him from a pest into a disciple, for the story ends with Bartimeaus following Jesus along the way. Indeed, how else could we know his name? As with Peter and John along the lake after a weary night with no fish to show for it, this is ultimately another story of the calling of one of Jesus' disciples.

And so too perhaps with the panhandlers within us. So too with those parts of our own soul who are forever making a racket, causing a scene, getting in our way. If we could but muster the faith that Jesus has in Bartimaeus, if we could but muster such faith in ourselves-- in all of ourselves, not only in those parts of ourselves we are proud of, but also in those parts of ourselves that we are ashamed of, that get in our way, if we could but recognize them not as demons, but as beggars, blinded by rage or pain, shame or neglect. If we could but muster the faith that Jesus has in Bartimeaus, to look them in the eye and ask them what it is that they really want, we might be able to find more than fleeting relief from them, we might be able to give more than a handout, we might be able to restore their sight, and our faith in ourselves, the whole of ourselves. For we too need new sight. We need to see ourselves as God sees us, as Jesus saw Bar-Timeaus. Not as a problem, but as one of his kids, with whom he is well pleased.