

Presbytery Bible Study as Spiritual Practice

I am going to assume that most of you took the time to read my discussion concerning bible study as a spiritual discipline which was printed in the handbook. Since I have a limited time with you, I will move right into our brief look at Mark 10:46-52.

The healing of the blind man named Bartemaeus seems at first read a typical healing or miracle story of Jesus. Such stories are quite common in the gospel accounts and are easy to be seen as all the same. I would encourage you to take a closer look at this passage. Taking time to dig deeper into the text opens up many new vistas of discernment as well as levels of meaning.

Let's begin with the overall context of this particular text within the Gospel of Mark. One of the unique characteristics of Mark's gospel is its overall structure. As one person has noted, Mark is a passion narrative with an extended introduction. In other words, the clear focus of Mark is the last week of Jesus' life and ministry. The crucifixion of Jesus colors how the reader understands the stories that precede the passion. Since our text sits at the transition that ends the Galilean ministry of Jesus and introduces us to his entry into Jerusalem, we can see how critical this text is to Mark's narrative and to his understanding of the gospel message.

The public ministry of Jesus begins in Mark 1:21 where Jesus enters a synagogue and confronts a man with an evil spirit. Jesus' public ministry concludes in chapter 8:26. At this point in the narrative the question of Jesus' true identity remains an open ended inquiry. Thus when Peter announces that Jesus is the messiah in 8:27, the reader could conclude that the disciples have fully understood Jesus' message. Unfortunately, the scene that follows has Jesus telling Peter that his understanding is closer to Satan's than to God's. In light of such a discouraging lack of understanding, Mark's gospel shifts into a critical section where Jesus announces his upcoming passion and seeks to prepare the disciples for that inevitable event. Our text is the last story of that section. Following this text, Jesus begins his entry into Jerusalem and passion week ensues.

Mark brackets this section of passion preparation for the disciples with two similar healing stories. In Mark 8:22-26, Jesus heals a blind man at Bethsaida. At the conclusion of the preparatory section, Mark tells yet another story about a man being blind in one way, yet able to see clearly in yet another. Placing stories at the beginning and end of a section is common in Mark and clearly lets the reader know that something more than a healing is occurring. In this case, the theme of "seeing" Jesus' identity seems to be of critical importance. It is interesting to note that after the healing of the blind man in Bethsaida, Peter seems to see who Jesus is, "You are the Christ", but then makes the wrong interpretation. Bartemeaus makes a similar announcement, "You are the Son of David," a pronouncement that Jesus does not challenge, but Mark will qualify later in chapter 12. Both men are in need of clarity as to who Jesus truly is as well as how Jesus will live out that identity (such clarity will not be supplied until the reader has experienced the passion followed by the resurrection). What is critical to Mark, is that both men end of following Jesus to Jerusalem.

This theme of seeing, but not really seeing, is also present in the immediate text. In the preceding story to ours, James and John make a request of Jesus to be at his right and left hand in the coming kingdom. While their request of Jesus is impossible to give, Mark contrasts their misguided desire with one that is granted to Bartimeaus. This connection is made by the repetition of the same

question of Jesus, "What do you want me to do?" Mark wants the reader to note the difference here, one request for sight will prepare us for what is coming in the coming week, the other request for positions of power will not.

Thus what we are encountering here is not just another healing story, but a story that is critical to Mark's understanding of discipleship and faith, as well as preparing the reader for what will be happening in the last week of Jesus' ministry.

Let's dig deeper into our text by looking specifically at each verse. I encourage you to follow along in your bibles. I will be reading from the NRSV, but multiple translations always make for a richer study of the text.

Verse 46: "They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimeaeus (son of Temeaus), a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside."

Jericho is 13 miles from Jerusalem. For many pilgrims this would be the last stop before entering the city. While Mark does not tell us what Jesus did while in Jericho, it can be easily assumed that this was a place for he and his disciples to sleep. One commentator has speculated that they likely entered the town on a Friday. Stayed in town for the Sabbath and began their journey to Jerusalem on Sunday.

Of course, none of this is important for Mark. He wants his readers to focus on the blind man by the roadside. Something we should note, while almost every translation states that Bartimeaus was "on the side of the road", the Greek could be translated differently. At the end of our text, Mark notes that Bartimeaus will follow Jesus "on the way." (Almost every scholar sees this phrase as describing Jesus' fateful journey to the cross.) This is the same phrase as "beside the road." I think that Mark wishes the reader to understand that Bartimeaus begins the story "along or beside Jesus' way to the cross" and in the end will join him "on the way to the cross." Such minor distinctions allow the reader to see that this story is so much more than a healing event.

Verse 47: "When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!'"

Again, there is nothing unusual about Bartimeaus calling out to Jesus. Many beggars would be doing the same thing. It was the way in which he addressed Jesus that makes the difference. While any male descendent of David could fall under the title, "Son of David", it is agreed upon by most scholars that Bartimeaus is making use of this title to proclaim Jesus as Messiah. This particular designation was quite political and the reader of Mark will find a further discussion of this issue in chapter 12:35-37. For the time being, the statement of the blind man seems more a forth telling of the coming shouts of the people who will welcome Jesus as he enters Jerusalem in chapter 11. Mark wishes for us to note that while Peter's same announcement of Messiahship was greeted with a stern rebuke from Jesus, his response to Bartimeaus will be much different.

Verse 48: “Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’”

The insistence of Bartemaeus to cry out, countering the desire of the crowd for his silence will be one of the markers of his faith that we will discuss more fully in a few verses.

Verses 49-50: “Jesus stood still and said, ‘Call him here.’ And they called the blind man, saying to him, ‘Take heart, get up, he is calling you.’ So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.”

We noted earlier that this text is often understood as a healing or miracle story. While there are some elements of this, it seems that based on this verse, Mark wants to portray this interaction with Jesus as less of a miracle and more of an echo of the calling of the disciples in chapter 1:16-20. The word “call” is used three times in verse 49. When Bartimeaus hears the calling he throws off his cloak, another action that echoes the call of Peter, Andrew, James and John. A blind man’s cloak was all that he owned. It represented the totality of his life. Much like the four fishermen who leave everything to follow Jesus, so Bartimeaus leaves his past behind to follow.

Verses 51-52: “Then Jesus said to him, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go, your faith has made you well.’ Immediately he regained sight and followed him on the way.”

The central message of Mark’s gospel is found in these two verses. We already noted the repetition of Jesus’ question, “What do you want me to do”? Bartimeaus asks for physical sight, but Mark desires his readers to note the spiritual insight of the blind man. Like the woman with the flow of blood in Mark 5:34, Jesus states that the faith of Bartimeaus has made him well or one could translate the word as “saved”.

What we have demonstrated in these verses is a clear definition of faith according to Mark. Faith for Mark is never belief in abstract truths, but rather faith is demonstrated with clear actions:

- A crying out to Jesus, even though the person does not clearly understand all of the aspects of who Jesus is
- A refusal to be silent, even in times when the “crowd” seeks to discourage you
- An eager response to when Jesus calls
- A clear focus on what you need
- A keen anticipation that Jesus will be able to grant your request
- Leaving the past behind and following Jesus on the way to the cross

All of these are signs of faith.

Now if I had more time, I would encourage a lively discussion as to what this text means to you. This is why bible study in community is so important. We need to hear what the Spirit is saying to each of us and in that listening, our own calling is made more clear. Instead, you will be placed into some small groups with two questions to discuss. If you find the questions less than helpful, then ask different questions. Let the questions generate discussion and then listen to each other and to God.