

Where Does One Go After Being Healed?

Sunday, October 25, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
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Mark 10:46-52

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" 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. 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 his sight and followed him on the way.

The healing of Bartimaeus is a much loved and celebrated story, for it tells of a beautiful act of God's mercy and restoration, and it tells of an amazing man. In earlier years I delighted in this blind beggar's loud faith, as he refused to be silenced. He had a definite faith and devotion which he insisted on broadcasting, and he was not shy about letting his need and desire for healing be known. Of late I have become fascinated by Bartimaeus' bold faith that led him to follow Jesus without hesitation. Not only is his example of faith impressive, but it raises a question for all of us: Where does one go after being healed? This question is much nearer and more real to us that we may realize! Let us consider Bartimaeus.

Upon healing this blind beggar Jesus gave a command. *Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well."* Jesus gives a general kind of command. *Go.* But where shall he go? The word which Mark uses is one with no implications of a specific direction. It is as though Jesus was saying, *run along, be on your way, or even, go home.* The decision was very much left with Bartimaeus, and Jesus seems to be offering no hints or expectations. So where does one go after such a great healing? I know the hands down favorite of destinations after such a time of crisis. We want to get "back to normal." Tragedy, trials, and disruptions cause pain in our lives, and they stir in us a deep desire to get back to our normal routines of life. We love our familiar routines and the

predictable rhythms of life, and long desperately to return to them. It would seem that normal is an obsession for us, and I plead guilty on this count.

I can tell of a recent healing event in my own life as I received cataract surgery on both of my eyes and can now see more clearly than I have for thirty years! What was my response to such a blessing? Some of my family does tell me that they became a little annoyed with my constant messaging about how wonderful my new set of eyes were working, so I suppose I did not flunk the gratitude test, but I must also confess that my heart was spending more time in places other than the land of gratitude. Any surgery, even a quick and easy out-patient surgery, is a disruption to life and time is lost from one's normal schedule. With genuine embarrassment I confess that I spend a lot of time wondering and worrying about time lost and getting my schedule, work, and other life routines back on track. When life does not feel normal, I become very uncomfortable, and fretting over the disruption takes a much bigger part in my life than thanksgiving. As our COVID crisis wears on we hear much talk about hopes of "getting back to normal." The virus has caused much disruption and our longing to return to normal habits and routines cannot be over-estimated.

One would expect Bartimaeus to go running, full speed, back to a waiting family, friends and the life that he had long known. While we know little of any family that he may have had, we do know that he is mentioned as the *son of Timaeus*, strongly implying that there was family surrounding him. The natural thing for this newly sighted beggar to do would have been to go running back to his home, and Jesus even appears to be nudging him in that direction, but Bartimaeus was no ordinary person! He sought no safe and secure kind of normal. Bartimaeus had his sights set on greater destinations.

This wise beggar had given much thought as to who this Jesus of Nazareth must be and loudly proclaimed Him to be the son of David—a clear statement of Jesus being the long-anticipated Messiah. One would imagine that this deep faith in Jesus was a major force in his decision to respond to his healing as he did. Mark tells us that *Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way*. Thus began a bold pilgrimage which took him in the *opposite* direction of home and the normal life. This was very much a decision freely made as no command or suggestion was given to attempt to influence his choice, and this trek would soon prove a difficult one, for in just a matter of days he would witness Jesus' betrayal, trial, and crucifixion. This was not the vision that anyone would wish upon a newly sighted disciple!

Why this sudden decision to leave home and follow? Gratitude is the first word which comes to mind, and we all know the importance of being thankful, but this word seems pale and weak in light of the incredible gift given by our Lord. I sense that Bartimaeus was a man obsessed! Bartimaeus was touched and changed by a mighty power, and he would have no rest until he could see and know such a glorious One! He wanted to learn all that he could about this wonderful Messiah and nothing else

mattered. As I consider Bartimaeus' noble obsession I must confess a deep shame over my own response to God's healing touch, and I do not believe that I am alone in my confession. We busily seek to restore normality in our lives. Looking back on times when God has rescued us, we may remember telling ourselves saying, "How glad I will be when this is over!" We might even have been heard to say how we "got lucky." God often doesn't get a prominent place in our telling of our story. The crisis is simply "over," and the real delight is in being back to normal. In our quickness to celebrate our return to the safe and familiar, do we even consider the hand which touched us? Wouldn't we want to find and embrace the wonderful One who has just entered our lives?

Perhaps I am being a bit too hard on "normal." Normal is by no means a purely evil thing. There is much good to be said about normal as order, routines, responsibilities, and healthy habits all have much to commend them. We were created to live orderly lives and our desire for normal is a longing to escape chaos and disorder which are generally associated with evil. The problem lies in our becoming so desirous of routine and a sense of safety within that routine that we begin to reject anything which threatens to disrupt the familiar. As the Soviet Union was on the verge of collapse many Russians spoke with great fear of this evil empire's coming to an end, for they feared for their pensions which might not survive if there was such a dramatic change of government. While it is easy to scorn such an attitude as being selfish and blind to the horrors of the old Soviet state, it is a sentiment which is very understandable! Our short sightedness can easily blind us to the greater picture, and rather than cheering on a greater day we can find ourselves blindly supporting the *status quo*. Bartimaeus saw the bigger picture. Now that God had touched him, he was not about to go back to normal. A new Kingdom was coming, and he did not want to miss any of it.

Bartimaeus' story of healing and his choice to follow strikes a chord in our hearts, for this story is really our story. To be a believer in Jesus Christ is to be Bartimaeus. In a congregation I once served there was a woman named Judy who was a tireless, joyful, and creative servant of God, and her service to the Church was considerable. Early in her life she made a decision to follow Christ, and then as a young adult she experienced serious health problems. God's sustaining power through this illness only made her more grateful and more zealous to serve. Judy led a rich life of service, although sadly she did not live to an old age. I recall another member of that congregation commenting that, "Yes, I suppose she was grateful and wanted to do much for the Church. You know we did help her and her family years back when she first had problems." (And such remarks remind me why many would rather die than be helped by the Church!) This parishioner was correct in recognizing the gratitude which so energized Judy's joy and service but was tragically mistaken in the rest of their comment. Such comments speak of a Church where a few are needy Barti-

maeuses and we help them, and the rest of us pull our own weight. Truth be told, we are all Judys. We are all Bartimaeus. Once we were weak and broken, but Christ has touched us and made us whole. Many, perhaps most of us, have been brought out of illness and tragedy by God's loving hand. All of us were sinners, separated from God and destined for death before Christ came and gave us life. All of us need to be living lives more like Judy's, or Bartimaeus'. Judy could have stayed home and worried over her compromised health. Perhaps she would have lived just a little longer had she done so. Bartimaeus could have gone home and been spared the horrors of witnessing our Lord's crucifixion. But they knew that they had been touched by God, and back to normal was not good enough. They had received a higher calling. We all have. Shall we follow, or shall we continue to run after that illusive normal, safe and familiar place?

One might protest that we do not all have the opportunity or ability to suddenly drop everything in our lives and run off to join the Sisters of Charity. This is true. If God is calling you to go and do something great, then please obey, but for the rest of us I offer two modest suggestions in light of Bartimaeus' witness. First, could we be a little less fearful and fear motivated. What are we so afraid of? Why are we so attached to normal, and so afraid of new experiences and places? We are frightened by the thought of even visiting an unfamiliar Church, let alone the thought of reaching the lost. Why am I so unsettled by the thought falling just a day or two behind in my work? Being anxious is not a good witness to our faith in God. Can we not trust God to hold our world together and to sustain us, especially after God has saved our souls and has rescued us innumerable times? Let us make an effort to be less beholden to normal and less afraid.

And let us attack this matter from the other angle as well. Could we be more joyful and adventurous in our faith? Gratitude is a good start, but our understanding of gratitude often goes little farther than saying thank you. A missions professor from my seminary had advice for students in their search for God's specific calling to service. He offered a two-step method. First, look for the place where God is doing an exciting work. Second, go there. Our walk of faith should have an element of adventure to it, but this is a part of our faith which we have largely forgotten. At the moment we are faced, like it or not, with a little bit of adventure. This Saturday we will hold our Christmas Bazaar in October, with hopes of conducting it all outdoors. This is being done to protect the public health during this virus, and this seems the right and godly thing to do. We love our familiar fundraising events, largely because they are so familiar, but this year we are faced with a huge infusion of change and uncertainty—or better stated, adventure. Shall we fret as this is so far from our normal experience, or shall we embrace this new event as an adventure, convinced that all is in the Master's capable hands? Tonight, we will commence an adult seminar on personality types and the Enneagram. Such events are hard to promote because they involve the unfamiliar. We don't usually do such things which makes these

sessions seem far from our sense of normal. There will be a teacher we barely know, a topic which will feel very new, and a bunch of visitors that we have never met before! Church people tend to be a very cautious lot, so is this enterprise doomed? But the Church folks who know and appreciate Bartimaeus see things differently. Perhaps Christ will be at this event, and we dare not miss the blessing!

It is commonly said after a serious health crisis or even at a birthday observance, "I guess God wants me around a little longer," and this remark is usually made in a whimsical manner. In truth this statement poses a very real and important question. As God has saved us, first through Christ's death and resurrection, and then delivering through so many of life's dangers, it becomes obvious that we *are* very important to God. God apparently *does* have work for us to do. Let us be a little less beholden to the safe and familiar, and just as Judy or Bartimaeus would do, let us dare to follow and find that new life.