

Choosing Wisely

Hebrews 7:23-28

Mark 10:46-52

Last Sunday when we read from the Gospel of Mark, we read of James and John and their request to Jesus. As Carol pointed out, they did it in the way that arouses our protective instincts: They said: “Teacher, there is something we want you to do for us.” Who among us doesn’t become suspicious when they hear words like that? It was about a month ago that a friend and colleague called and asked me to do him a big favour ... and I responded with the same words that Jesus actually uses in the original Greek: “What do you want me to do for you?” My colleague wanted me to co-lead a workshop with him, which I did. But James and John wanted something far more: they wanted honour and glory in the kingdom of God. There isn’t one of us who doesn’t hear: “I want you to do something for me,” without at least the reservation of wondering what is coming next. So isn’t it interesting that the passage from this same Gospel which follows directly upon last week’s has Jesus responding to the blind beggar with exactly the same words he used with James and John, and the same words that so often come from us: What do you want me to do for you?”

The placement of this story of Bartimaeus tells us, not only that it is a story about choices, but also, in the evangelist’s design of his gospel, a telling contrast between what the disciples want and what someone who seems to have nothing wants.

At first glance it might seem to us that the choice is simple.

Jesus asks Bartimaeus what he wants and the blind man declares that he wants to see *again*. But the choice is not as obvious as it initially appears. We have no knowledge of what Bartimaeus' life was like when he could see before. We don't know what happened to cause him to lose his sight. But we can be certain that his life was changed dramatically with the loss of his vision. We can be equally certain that with the giving of his sight Bartimaeus' life is going to be transformed once more. The routine that has become familiar will disappear and he will once again have to learn an entirely new way of living, of acting, of thinking, and of being. It takes a great deal of courage to respond as Bartimaeus responded, to dare to risk complete transformation for a second time.

Perhaps the most frightening aspect of this story is the knowledge that we are Bartimaeus. We may not suffer from physical blindness, or from any visible physical impairment. And yet who among us has never prayed to God with a request. Who has never cried out, hoping and praying for an answer, and yet, quietly doubting that we will receive any response? Who among us really expects the Christ to turn aside and ask us what we really want. Who among us has dared to consider what the answer to our prayers may cost us?

But we are also members of the crowd. We are uneasy when someone cries out loudly, demanding attention, with those who are no longer content to accept whatever life has given them, seeking something more, challenging the authorities or the person in authority to notice them, to really see them, and to address their needs and their concerns. Who among us has not sought to silence their cries? We say things like, "You can't fight city hall." Or "That's just the way it is." Or, "You have to learn to accept things, even the fact that life

isn't fair." Or, most subtle of all, "What can one person do?"

Bartimaeus will not be shushed. He keeps on crying out until Jesus calls him to come. Even that is a challenge. But Bartimaeus flings off his cloak — and please know that by doing so he is casting away a very real security blanket. His cloak is his blanket at night and his begging bowl by day. When he dares to fling it aside he is declaring that he is confident that he will be healed. When he flings the cloak aside he is casting away any coins that he may already have gathered, and he is declaring that he is confident that healing is worth everything he has.

When we call out to God, or to the Christ, do we let go of our security blankets? Do we risk everything? Do we demonstrate to God, and to everyone around us just how confident we are that God will answer our prayers, that we have no further need of our current source of security? Are we willing to risk complete transformation and venture into the unknown? The normal request of a beggar is for money. Bartimaeus reached beyond the usual and sought the miraculous, believing that it could and would happen to him. How about us?

Last week when Jesus asked James and John "What do you want?", their request was inappropriate and was not granted. They wanted status without risk. Bartimaeus was willing to accept the risk of a new life and all that it entailed. And his response was found worthy and his request was granted.

This story is challenging for us because we know that not everyone who asks is granted a physical cure. We are certain that there is always healing, that the spirit is touched. We are certain that there is always the promise of transformation. But we are not always

sure that what we seek will be granted in the ways we desire. Sometimes we want the small changes, changes that don't really challenge us. We want to discern the future God wills for this congregation, and for the other United Church congregations in this city, but we share some uncertainties about where that might lead. In conversation with the clergy from the other three congregations that have chosen "Option 3" – that is the choice to proceed with further conversations about sharing a future together (Oh, and just for your information, that would be Bedford, Central, Westminster and Lincoln Road who are continuing with these conversations right now) – but in our conversations, it became clear that not all of the congregations are willing to consider moving to the place where they will not be in their own church building. They're looking for ways that will let them stay where they are – limiting the potential for transformation. Maybe clergy aren't always the best judges, and maybe what we sometimes articulate reflects our own longings and uncertainties. Time alone will tell. It seems that we'd like other people to change, but only within the parameters that are comfortable for us. We don't want to embark on an adventure that might prove to be just a little too scary for us. But then again, maybe we do! Maybe we're ready .

We want a deeper and richer relationship with our God, but we want to be able to hold part of ourselves in reserve. We want to get up and encounter the Christ, but we may be a little reluctant to cast away our cloak. Part of us would like to hold on to our crutch, or our building, or whatever is familiar even though it is limiting us just in case things don't work out quite the way we planned.

Bartimaeus tossed aside his cloak, asked for the healing that

would completely transform his life, and when his request was granted, the Gospel tells us he left all of the familiar behind to follow Jesus. Bartimaeus entered into full discipleship, following the Christ. He didn't do anything by half measures. No one could confuse him in his choice. He saw all of the options, all of the possibilities, and he stayed true to his purpose. It's been suggested that the only reason we know the name of this once blind beggar is because his healing was more than simply the gift of physical vision. His healing included the spiritual as well, and so he is the only one in scripture who encounters Jesus, asking for healing and whose name has been recorded.

It's a wonderful story. It's a wonderful challenge. We find this man who embraces the fulness of life when given the chance, and we wonder: what about us? How clearly do we see? How clearly do we understand the choices and all of the implications? Every day we encounter the Christ. Every day he asks us, "What do you want me to do for you?" When next he asks us, how shall we answer? Do we want only what will leave us not too uncomfortable. And what shall we risk? Only a little? Or our entire selves, whatever the demands that such a change will place on us? He asks us today, and he will ask us again tomorrow: what do you want me to do for you? What will we answer? Amen.