



FINDING GOD: BY CALLING OUT FOR HELP

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Mark 10:46-52

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Part of our process of welcoming new members into the life of Brick Church is a Saturday morning class in which the prospective members learn about the many ministries we have. As one of the speakers, I share a variety of things with the class but it always includes my acknowledgement that I seek Brick Church to be a counter cultural community. I am not speaking of the Sixties counterculture of tie-dyed t-shirts and love beads. I am speaking of a community that pushes back against some of the culture of New York City, the John Wayne ethos of our metropolis. Part of what makes New York such a vital and thriving city is that people are driven to succeed. And in our drive to succeed we refuse to show any weakness. We stand strong against whatever challenges we encounter. Like John Wayne, in some old western, we never need to call out for help because we stand invincible and defiant against any obstacle, no matter how great.

This mindset allows for an ever-kinetic and exciting city, but is not the mindset we are called to have as community of Christian faith. Here at Brick Church we want to be able to admit that we are less than perfect; that we cannot conquer the world seven days a week, 24 hours a day; that we may indeed need some help and support sometimes; that we need each other; and that we need our God.

As we continue this sermon series on “Five Ways We Find God (Or God Finds Us)”, we turn to the way in which acknowledging we need help can bring us closer to the divine. Our text this morning from the Gospel of Mark tells the story of the encounter between Bartimaeus and Jesus. As Jesus is making his way through the



crowds to leave Jericho he hears a shout that penetrates through the din, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” And it was as loud as the trumpets that blew down the walls of Jericho many years before. The crowd tries to quiet the blind beggar, Bartimaeus who is calling out, but he will not be silenced. With urgency he cries out once more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus responds to his call and invites the man forward. Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and approaches Jesus. Jesus asks the man, “What do you want me to do for you?” Bartimaeus begs for his sight and Jesus announces to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Bartimaeus, regaining his sight, follows Jesus on the way.

It is one of several healing stories in Mark but it is distinct in a number of ways. First of all, Bartimaeus’ refusal to be quieted by the crowd. He will let nothing stop him from expressing his need to be healed by Jesus. The context is also quite interesting. Earlier in the chapter Jesus has interactions with the rich man and with his disciples, the brothers James and John. The rich man has honored every last commandment but asks what he must do to inherit eternal life, to be guaranteed eternal life. When Jesus tells him he must give up his wealth and be in need, the man walks away crestfallen, unable to accept that vulnerable position.

As they are journeying with Jesus, James and John come to him with their own request. They ask, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” James and John want a piece of the adulation and power they envision coming Jesus’ way. In both of these interactions, the rich man and James and John are making requests of Jesus that will put them beyond the bounds of needing anything. They have not a need to be filled but a want to be satisfied. And that want entails having no more need. The rich man wants guarantees of what is to come for him without ever experiencing any need. The disciples, James and John, want to bask in the glory without any understanding of the vulnerable road that it will take to get there.

Bartimaeus does not call out to Jesus because he wants something. He calls out recognizing he needs something. He calls out in need of mercy, in need of sight.



And he receives what he requests. He is given the gift of sight and he uses that sight to follow Jesus “on the way.”

When we bring real and honest need before our God, we are opening up the possibility for God to bless us. In this text there is a little bit of philosophical wordplay going on with Bartimaeus’ name. As the text acknowledges, Bartimaeus means son of Timaeus. If you were to dust off your introduction to philosophy textbook from college you would be reminded of a work written by Plato entitled, “Timaeus.” It was a book read by just about every educated person in the region for years before, during, and after Jesus' life. (The homiletics professor Tom Long pointed out this connection to me.)

Plato's conception of the world as laid out in Timaeus shaped much of the intellectual discourse on how the world was envisioned. In the text, Plato writes of the world as being made "in the form of a globe, round as from a lathe, having its extremes in every direction equidistant from the centre, the most perfect and the most like itself of all figures...harmonised by proportion...a perfect whole." Plato writes of the world possessing its own soul, its own independent life, "by reason of its excellence able to converse with itself, and needing no other friendship or acquaintance." He speaks of the world itself being "a blessed God."¹

In the gospel of Mark, of all the people who are healed, it is only Bartimaeus who is mentioned by name. This is no mere story of bringing sight to one man on the side of the road. This is a story of challenging and changing the vision of the entire educated class of the ancient world.

The gospel of Mark does not see the world as some perfect, independent sphere but as a place that though a gift of divine creation, is also broken and in desperate need of God's intervention. The gospel of Mark is about God, in the humanity of Jesus, breaking into the world to heal all of those things that bring us damage and harm.

The gospel of Mark recognizes that we need God. We really need God. And until we acknowledge this need it is difficult to be in relationship with God. The most



direct way we own our need for God is by turning toward the divine in prayer. The words that Bartimaeus continues to shout out over the protests of the crowd, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” They have become a prayer that has been prayed for countless generations.

Prayer, at its basest level, is admitting there is something or someone beyond who we are and what we know, that has a power beyond our own. Anne Lamott describes it like this, “Prayer can be motion and stillness and energy—all at the same time. It begins with stopping in our tracks, or with our backs against the wall, or when we are going under the waves, or when we are just so sick and tired of being psychically sick and tired that we surrender, or at least we finally stop running away and at long last walk or lurch or crawl toward something. Or maybe, miraculously, we just release our grip slightly. Prayer is talking to something or anything with which we seek union.”²

And why are we seeking this union? Because some small part of us hopes that there is something out there, which has helped or can help us; something with a power beyond anything we can possess. There is an old joke which Lamott references. “What is the difference between you and God? God never thinks she is you.” If we want to be in relationship with God, we need to start at that most basic of truths. We are not God. We do not control all of the outcomes. We do not have the power to fix everything in this life and in ourselves we would like to fix.

God is God, and we are us. And what we are, are remarkable creatures, imbued with so many stunning qualities, and yet simultaneously we are remarkably imperfect. We have needs, and needs beyond our power to fulfill. There are many voices in our culture that will attempt to drown out our efforts to acknowledge our imperfection and our need. We are told that admitting imperfection and need is a sign of weakness. We are told we can have it all if we just work hard enough. We are told that the best and the brightest never admit defeat. But the reality is that those who deny their imperfection and need are deluding themselves. They are



chasing after guarantees and glory that they will never achieve. They are not demonstrating their strength but their own insecurity, which is actually a weakness.

When we pray to God, we have the opportunity to own our needs. We can turn toward the divine and say sometimes life is too much; sometimes we are at wit's end about how to manage work and children and relationships; sometimes we get so very tired of pretending everything is perfect when it is not so perfect; sometimes we are lonely; sometimes we wake up in the middle of the night and fear the future. When we talk to God at that deepest level of truth, we are open to experiencing the powerfully transforming presence of God in our lives.

It may not be the way many of us are used to speaking. But if we wonder how we might start this conversation with God, perhaps we can borrow from our friend Bartimaeus, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." And let's leave the rest in the hands of the one who creates, redeems and sustains us on each new day.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Plato, *Timaeus*, page 33.

² Lamott, Anne, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*, Penguin, New York, 2012, page 5.