

**Proper 25, Year B**

10/28/2018

[Jeremiah 31:7-9](#)

[Psalms 126](#)

[Hebrews 7:23-28](#)

[Mark 10:46-52](#)

**What's So Scary About the Gospel?**

I'm scared. Not just because I see ghosts and goblins in the congregation today because of the "Scary Good Potluck." No, I'm scared for Bartimaeus, even though he is one courageous man. I know he's moving in the right direction, and I wouldn't put him off it for anything in the world. But I feel a little afraid for this once blind man who has regained his sight because his transformation is only beginning. And transformation is never easy.

Hearing Bartimaeus' story in the gospel of Mark reminds me a little of the story of Louis Zamperini. Do you know that name? Louis's story was detailed a few years ago in Laura Hillenbrand's excellent book *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption*. Zamperini was an Olympic runner who went on to military service in World War II only to survive a plane crash in the Pacific, followed by 47 days on a raft lost at sea, followed by two years in a Japanese POW camp. It's an incredible story of survival and transformation, and you might even have seen the movie based on the book that came out a couple of years ago.

Many people criticized the film because it leaves out half of the story detailed in the book. We see Zamperini's track career, we see his crash, time on the raft, time in the POW camp, and the liberation of he and his fellow prisoners. Exciting and inspiring, but that's only half of his story. The movie leaves out what

happens to Zamperini after he comes home. It leaves out his struggles with PTSD, alcoholism, his ultimate conversion to Christianity by Billy Graham, and his recovery from addiction. Zamperini was no doubt transformed by his experiences in the war, but his transformation was just beginning.

That's how I feel about Bartimaeus' story, and why I am a little scared for him. Like most of the people Jesus interacts with in the gospels we never hear the follow-up to Bartimaeus story. We witness his regaining sight, but he's never mentioned again. I wonder what happened next. We only get a clue at what's next for him when Mark tells us that he followed Jesus "on the way." That's what worries me, because we all know what "the way" is in the New Testament. It's the way of the cross. He might have regained his sight, but now he's following his savior Jesus down the road to Jerusalem. Following Jesus to the cross. Bartimaeus' challenges are just beginning. And I believe that subconsciously we all recognize this about those we see following Jesus in the gospels, and that makes the gospel a little scary for us who are also called to follow Jesus.

I want to look a little at the part of Bartimaeus' story that Mark presents. Here's Bar-Timaeus, which means "son of Timaeus," a blind beggar who has nothing in this world save the good name of his father. We never hear *his* name, only that he's Timaeus' boy. Otherwise, he has no sight, he has no standing among his peers (they spend most of first part of the story trying to shut him up), nothing at all it seems except a cloak. But, don't feel sorry for Timaeus, because while he may be a beggar he's no victim. He's ready for transformation in his life. That cloak and that good name are not all he has. Bartimaeus has a voice, he has

courage, and he has a desire for transformation, and he uses them all.

Listen to Mark's words: "When [Bartimaeus] heard that . . . Jesus of Nazareth [was coming by], 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!'" Bart won't be silenced. He hears Jesus is coming cries out for mercy. He doesn't ask anyone else to get Jesus' attention for him, he goes straight to the source. And the crowd of Jesus' followers tries to shut him up! "Many sternly ordered him to be quiet," but that doesn't stop him. Bart's not worried about being polite for others, he's worried about his own direct interaction with Jesus. He musters his courageous voice, and his desire for transformation, and shouts even louder.

Jesus hears Bartimaeus' pleas . . . and stops. This is one of three transformations in this story, and it happens first to Jesus himself. Jesus, Mark tells us, "Stood still." He had to stop and listen. When we stop to listen—which is rare these days—we might just find ourselves transformed, our forward momentum halted, our ears, minds, and hearts unstopped. Jesus tells the crowd to call him over, and this is where the second transformation happens. Suddenly, those so quick to try and silence the blind beggar are fawning over themselves to get to him, "Take heart, get up! He's calling you!" This moment goes by quickly in the story, but it's crucial. Remember that it's *followers of Jesus*, who dismiss Bartimaeus. The Church over time and throughout the world has been no different. We followers of Jesus are just as quick as anyone to dismiss or exclude those who we find strange or different, or who we think are undeserving of God's

love and attention. We still do it! And it has taken the words of Jesus again and again to transform our understanding. It is Jesus who points us toward those voices who are crying out for God. We talked about this in our “Used & Abused” series recently, about what the Church said for centuries to slaves, what it has said to Jews, what it has said to women, to the poor and marginalized, to the LGBT community. It has taken the ears of Jesus hearing the cries of those seeking transformation and relationship with Him, and the voice of Jesus redirecting his followers to hear those cries, to point out to us that we all stand in need of transformation. Jesus hears when we don’t, which is why we must stop and listen to Him, so we can hear the voices he’s listening for.

Jesus is transformed in that moment by the cries of Bartimaeus. The crowd is transformed by Jesus’ direction. Then it’s Bartimaeus’ turn for transformation. What does he do when the crowd brings him to Jesus? First, he throws off his cloak! This is the one thing he has in the world. His one material possession. It provides him warmth at night, and protection from the sun in the day. He likely would have laid it out in front of him to collect alms, so in a way it’s his wallet. He tosses it aside, his whole life. I wonder if Mark wants us to remember here the rich man we heard about a few weeks ago who, when Jesus told him to give away all he owned and follow him, went away sad. Bart casts it all aside, jumps up and goes to Jesus. “Jesus, I want to see.” And Bartimaeus’ eyes are opened, his life is transformed.

And this is where I get scared for him. He’s a courageous man. He leaves behind everything that’s comfortable for him, which while he does it eagerly it

still must have been scary. I wonder if later he ever came to a point where he wondered if he'd done the right thing that day in Jericho when Jesus passed by? Like the Israelites in the desert, who had been so eager to leave behind their slavery in Egypt, yet when they faced the difficult journey ahead sometimes thought, "Wasn't being a slave easier than this? This journey is difficult. Is it worth it? Maybe we should turn around, Moses. Maybe the Egyptians will take us back! At least our bellies were full there!" Bartimaeus' life has been transformed by Jesus, but now he's following Jesus to the cross. And the way of the cross is a scary road, but it's the road where meaningful transformation of life happens. Just like Louis Zamperini's transformation did not end with his liberation from that POW camp, so Bartimaeus' transformation surely did not end with his healing. Transformation is a lifelong pursuit, and we're all either on the road, or alongside it somewhere along the way.

Most of us here this morning have lives less challenging than Bartimaeus', but that doesn't mean we stand in any less need of transformation and ongoing conversion of life. Again, it's the disciples, over and over again in the gospels, who do not get it. It's the followers of Jesus who dismiss Bartimaeus' need. It's those on the margins who seem always to know exactly who Jesus is, and to whose cries Jesus is directing his followers' attention. That means we, as Jesus' followers today, must stop and listen. The Rev. Paul Frohberg, the Rector of St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco, was our guest speaker at Diocesan Convention this week, and he talked to us about the theme "The Art of Transformation." He had a lot of great things to say about transformation, but one

thing he said resonates with me in relation to this gospel reading. He talked about “growing out of not knowing.” He talked about transformation being possible when we “let go for the sake of what we don’t know,” and when we “make relationships with those we don’t know.” It seems to me that that’s what has to happen for everyone in the Bartimaeus story. Bartimaeus doesn’t know what will happen when he uses his voice. He doesn’t know what following Jesus on the way will bring, but he “lets go for the sake of what he doesn’t know.” He forms a relationship with Jesus who he doesn’t know. Jesus also let’s go and forms relationship with Bartimaeus. The crowd lets go for the sake of what they don’t know, and for the sake of Jesus. Everyone in this story has to open themselves up to vulnerability and to take a risk for transformation.

Transformation is possible for any of us at any time if we’re open to it. But we might have to leave something behind. It might be possessions. It might be attitudes. It might be beliefs. It might be habits. It might mean having to embrace our failures, and to lean in to discomfort. Transformation is always about letting go of something, but it’s also about gaining something new. It might be new eyes. It might be new relationships. It will certainly mean something more meaningful and purposeful. But there’s no two ways about: the way of the cross is . . . kind of scary. It requires being brave like Bartimaeus, open like Jesus, and humbled like the crowd. Yet the road to Jerusalem, the road to the cross, is always the road to new possibilities, and ultimately the road to resurrected life.