

Providence Presbyterian Church
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Mark 10: 46-52

Bartimaeus is blind. He comes to see in this brief story. But it is his voice that carries. It is also the voices of those who try to quiet him, squelch his voice, that strikes me. In fact, for a short passage, we have quite a bit of direct speech—people raising their voices. And though Jesus does heal his eyes, it is his voice that draws Jesus to him. It is his voice that opens the possibility. Jesus first hears and makes space for Bartimaeus' voice. Jesus first hears, listens, invites, asks a question, blesses. All actions related to speech and hearing.

Yes, Bartimaeus was blind. He could not physically see. But such physical conditions were compounded with stigmas. He was therefore ostracized and reduced to begging. Society was not structured for his benefit. It left him on the margins, desperate and uncared for. Indeed, Bartimaeus was blind, and all that comes with it socially and psychologically. So while his condition is blindness, the stigmas and messaging could easily disparage and send him off to the margins quietly, thus quieting his voice as well.

Voice connotes at least two things. One is a sense of confidence. To voice one's feelings or concerns means a level of confidence to speak up or speak for oneself. I was voted class quietest in high school. My voice physically worked, but I did not talk much because of confidence. I was afraid to speak lest I say something wrong or that gets laughed at. It took me a while to find my own voice. Therefore, Bartimaeus' voice crying out over the competing voices strikes me. The second connotation is whose concerns get attention or rise to a priority. Voice has to do with whose concerns go noticed and attended to. Those not attended to, we might say they have no voice. Both aspects are at play in this story.

But there is another detail we are told of. Bartimaeus was also the son of Timaeus. It is kind of funny and redundant also. Bar in Aramaic means son. His name means "son of Timaeus." The name of his father is stated twice, therefore. Who is Timaeus, you ask? Beats me! I have no idea. But "the son of..." was like a last name in a small town. It identified you with a family. Many characters show up in the gospel stories who don't have names, like the woman at the well, the leper, or the man born blind. Other times a name is given. Not too often is the family specified. His father was known. His family was known. He had a father. He had a family. He had a people. And yet. And yet, here he is on the street. Blind. Begging. Ostracized. Tell me, what causes one who has a family and friends and connections

to become so isolated, so pushed to the margin, so much a receptacle of negative messages; negative messages that become believable, in fact, almost hard to deny?

Like Bartimaeus, many have internalized these harsh realities to such a degree that we would never even hear their voice. They lack confidence, and they lack public concern; they have no voice. They have internalized the message, and they have already taken the step on their own to quiet themselves. Guilt. Shame. Hopelessness. Dejectedness. These quiet truths have a way of taking seed. The message gets conveyed, received, and acted on. And we never have to be bothered by their voices.

Have you ever been like Bartimaeus? Have you taken your place and been reluctant to raise your voice? It also makes me wonder who the people in our world are needy and desperate but who have no voice. Either they don't have the wherewithal or the means to raise their voices, or we are safely removed from their voices. There are voices that we don't hear. But perhaps one reason we don't hear them is that we talk over them, speak for them, and judge and characterize without knowing. We get annoyed when we must acknowledge the ways our patterns or ways of speaking have marginalized others. We have insulated ourselves from them by talking for them and over them. For while Bartimaeus cries out, "Many sternly ordered him to be quiet."

Bartimaeus has not internalized it all to such a degree that he cannot resist the currents that would keep him quiet. They tried, though. In fact, I may not have even noticed Bartimaeus' voice as much upon reading if it wasn't for the attempts to still that voice, to quiet him. "Many sternly ordered him to be quiet."

It is ironic, I would say. For the "many" that ordered him to be quiet were likely those that are following Jesus. For Mark says that "[Jesus] and his disciples and a large crowd" were coming through, and we are left to assume it is one from this crowd that wants to see and hear and follow what Jesus is doing. They follow him, but it doesn't seem to register. "Shut up, Bartimaeus. Don't you realize we're trying to watch a healing here!" Good grief, pipe down, would you?! "Keep it down, Bartimaeus, we're trying to hear Jesus talk about the Kingdom of God, and you are distracting us."

It didn't click, at least not until Jesus tells them to stop shushing this fellow; to stop shushing Bartimaeus, and instead to invite him near. "And they called the blind man," Mark writes, "saying to him, 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.'"

I wonder, if you were performing this line in a play, how would you articulate it? What tone? What attitude? What volume? “And they called the blind man, saying to him, ‘Take heart; get up, he is calling you.’” I hear it with sarcasm, and a little bit of disgust. As if to say, “take heart,” ‘you got your way.’ But how do you hear it? Is it sincere? Have these folks seen their own blindness and changed, and now sincerely invite this man to approach the one that can help him see? Have they moved beyond spectatorship and selfish voyeurism to a place of compassion?

Society is built, to a degree, on conformity. Unity we might call it. Solidarity. Common ideals. But at its base is a degree of conformity. We conform to certain patterns and expectations. It allows us to function as a group. It allows us to navigate our roads and public spaces without running into each other. You drive on the right side of the road. You conform, and it allows for a degree of order. But in any pattern of conformity, there is a power structure. Certain voices get heard, while others are quieted. Certain concerns get attention, and others are deemed less urgent or important. Certain voices get to shape the conversation, while others are expected to support and fall in line. Certain voices get center stage, while others are pushed to the margins. Bartimaeus and the blind are pushed to the margins. And other voices fill the air. Voices of authority. Voices of ascendancy.

In fact, in Mark’s gospel, many voices are not shy to express their desires and expectations to Jesus. We’ve read several of these in the last couple of months. The disciples want the best seats at the banquet table. Peter wants Jesus to stop talking soft and start talking tough about kicking the Roman army’s butt. There is a Jewish Synagogue leader who wants his son to be healed. The Rich Young ruler wants eternal life and validation for all the good things he has done. James and John want the seats on the right and left hand of Jesus’ throne, seats of power and honor. The teachers of the law want Jesus to pass their examinations, want him to prove he has done his homework, and pay his due to the elders of the law. Yes, one by one, they have voiced their requests. But each of these requests seems to impose on Jesus some expectation for how Jesus should lead. These requests suggest who Jesus should honor and how Jesus ought to conform to patterns and expectations of the society, culture, and the hierarchy of voices.

So it is interesting that Jesus resists such patterns. He will work hard to maintain his own voice rather than be coopted by these prevalent expectations. He also privileges voices that have been marginalized. And by giving voice to the previously quieted, the order of things changes. And what changes is that the voices previously muted begin to be heard. Jesus speaks harsh words to the powerful, rebukes the disciples’ desires for honor and power, and he heals and gives voice to the lowest.

Despite efforts to quiet Bartimaeus, Jesus hears him. And Jesus does another unusual thing. He does not assume he knows this man just because he is in the position of a beggar and just because he may even appear to be blind. He does not assume, and he does not speak for Bartimaeus. But he asks Bartimaeus what he wants. And in the space that this question creates, Bartimaeus speaks those simple yet saturated words – “My teacher, let me see again.” He voices his desire to see, but what healing happens already to someone stigmatized and spoken for, to speak and be heard.

As Longley states in the poem, what does it mean to “find again your voice?” How do you get it back once you’ve lost confidence or there is no space for you to be heard? Is it a matter of being louder than all the other voices vying for air space, competing for privilege and priority? Is it to talk over others? What does it mean to find your voice again, and what does it do? What does it mean for this to be a redemptive move and not just a competition?

One thing we notice in this story of Bartimaeus is that his response to his healing is not to go back to some old life, not to go and try to recreate what he lost back when he lost his sight, not to go make up for lost time, not to reclaim some old power structure where he was the son of Timaeus. His response is to follow, to move forward to some new place. His regained sight and his exercised voice to find some new expression, in a new context. Longley’s poem speaks to this sort of adaptability, an acknowledgment of a new context, a new reality. “Something changed / All you took for granted / Is suddenly rearranged.” “It’s not the way you planned it / Not in your wildest dreams.”

In this sense, finding your voice is to find a way forward, where you again know your place, can declare your worthiness to be heard, known, and helped, even healed. Voice is confidence. Voice is having your concerns dignified.

For years I used to have a recurring dream. In the dream, we were in the house, and there was an intruder, and I’d try to yell but couldn’t get any air. The circumstances of the dream would shift, but each time I would want to yell or call out, and I didn’t have wind or voice.

Now that is an odd detail to throw in here, I suppose. But, it was after my year of Clinical Pastoral Education, doing group work, and visiting hospital rooms over and over, and processing all those experiences at length, that I began to find my voice with more confidence. And after that intense year, those recurring dreams stopped. So, when Longley speaks of finding again your voice, I can identify with

it, and I also have a sense of how much work it takes. It takes a lot to find your confidence and to claim your space. But it also takes a lot of learning to do it without speaking over others at the same time. It takes practice to find again your voice without it being a contest of voices and authority and power struggles – struggles over whose voice will carry.

I've been leading a Ruminations group for several years now, reading upcoming scriptures with a group, and I've learned from others' observations. And one of those observations that has stuck with me was how the gospel writers have a way of resorting to labels for nameless groups themselves. So that even while a once glossed over person like Bartimaeus is dignified, they will lump others together, such as the "many," or the "teachers of the law" or "the Gentiles," or the "Pharisees." Certain voices are obscured in these designations, and people get lumped namelessly into a group. In a sense there is a move to privilege the voices that have been marginalized, like Bartimaeus, and marginalize voices that have been previously privileged, like the "many." But there is a risk there. That we merely perpetuate the silencing and marginalizing of others. In asserting one's voice and place, we talk over others, we become blind to others, like the crowd of Jesus' followers who tell a man who cries out for Jesus to be quiet.

Society and groups within society function through conformity, or perhaps some form of cooperation and connection. And perhaps finding a redemptive movement within such groups is to find your voice without having to shout over others, to know your place while also claiming another's place. Is this not the dance contained in that oft-quoted command, to love others as we love ourselves? We cannot love others if we do not come to see ourselves as beloved.

I guess the question that lingers is what Bartimaeus will be like when he is in the crowd. He finally felt heard, and was healed, and found a path forward. But he had to do so through shouting. He had talk over those trying to quiet him. So, will he be better than the crowd that tried to silence his voice? Will he help create a space where we can connect and affirm one another, or will he perpetuate that impulse to speak over another? Will we become secure enough to listen to others, or will we always feel the need to shout over one another?

If at the center of this gospel story we tell, if at the center of this religious and redemptive tradition we find ourselves in is the story of love, of a God who lovingly calls his people home, who redeems the lost, and declares a knowledge of us when we were still in our mother's wombs, then how can we start to find a voice for ourselves and for others that reflects such truths. Voice as confidence and knowing we are loved. Voice as dignity for our experiences and our needs.

It may come off awkwardly at first, like Bartimaeus shouting on the curb, but maybe in time we will get better at claiming our own beloved-ness, while claiming that of others as well, loving others as we love ourselves. Because those nameless faces that we have othered, they too are the son or daughter of somebody, they too are trying to find their voice, so they can say what they want and need. Wouldn't it be something if we could hear it?

And all God's people said...

The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus

(Mt 20:29–34; Lk 18:35–43)

⁴⁶ 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. 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!” ⁴⁸ Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁹ 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.” ⁵⁰ So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹ 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.” ⁵² Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.