

Now this story does make me just a little bit nervous. I think it makes all of us upper middle class Methodists nervous because you know we would never, ever, ever yell out our prayers in public. We wouldn't do it. The ushers would escort you out of here so fast it would make your head spin. But Bartemeous would not be held back by decorum and manners.

Now, speaking of appropriate behavior, it seems, now this is a joke, it seems there was an Episcopalian who died and went to Heaven. St. Peter was conducting him through purgatory where he saw some people who were just miserable. He said, “What are those people doing here? What have they done to deserve this?” St. Peter said, “Those are Jews who are guilty of eating ham.” He went over, and he found another group in worse shape, and he asked of Peter, “What did these people do?” Peter said, “Now, these were Catholic who should have eaten fish on Friday, but instead they ate ham.” He found another group of people, who was even worse off and more miserable than the two before, and he said, “Who are those people? What in the world have they done?” Peter said, “Well, these are Episcopalians, and they were caught eating ham with their salad fork.” I know. It's bad. It's bad.

Bartemeous cried out not caring who told him to shhhh, be quiet, bad manners! The way I picture it, it was early morning, the air was still damp with dew, and the blind man had been waiting by the roadside since the night before. Word had come to his village that the healer would pass this way in the morning, and the hope for sight had never left him. True, he had been blind for most all of his life, yet through all the sinews of his spirit, the simple trust persisted that some day, somehow, he would regain his sight at last. He hears the gathering footsteps coming his way. He tilts his head to hear just a little better how close they were and to judge the precise moment when he ought to make his move and be heard. All his life, all his life, he had waited for this precise moment.

You know, some of us, myself included, kicked ourselves for a lifetime because we missed that moment! We look back on a moment that we should have acted, and we did not. We were too timid, too unprepared, and we have missed some big moment where we should have spoken up. We should have done something, said something, but did not. Bartemeous didn't miss his moment. He was ready. When he was certain that it was the healer and that the healer was near enough to hear, he stood and he faced the footsteps. He sprang up and he began to cry for all he was worth, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Over and over he said it until the words became one with the walking rhythm of the approaching feet of Jesus and His disciples. Son of David, Jesus, have mercy on me.

For just a second, and I take a risk in doing this because some of you may drop off to sleep, but close your eyes just for a second. Listen and imagine wanting and yearning and praying for healing of mind and body and soul. Imagine lying in wait through the night and into the morn, and having the determination and the boldness and the reckless abandon beyond propriety, beyond manners! Imagine knowing what you know is broken

inside of you and knowing that Jesus the healer is coming within earshot of you! What do you do? Keep your eyes closed and imagine the moment. Imagine all the moments when you could have brought healing to another or begged out loud for healing for yourself! Imagine those times you have let those moments pass! When you said nothing until the footsteps became the pounding nails into a dead opportunity passed and gone! Now, imagine knowing what is broken within you, what is bound in regret, what is bitter bringing death into every day of life! Imagine yourself bold with faith, grasping out and filling the air with your voice over and over, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Now, open your eyes, and if you will, and if you’re bold enough, say it or whisper it or pray it with me. Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!

When I imagine myself there, and I try to, I can see Jesus stopping. I can see Jesus looking and paying attention to me off to the side of the road, maybe in the ditch. You know, some part of me and some part of you is always broken and off to the side in the ditch. Jesus stops. Jesus looks. Jesus listens. The crowd says, “Shhhh! Be quiet! Be quiet, you blind beggar! This is an important man! Who do you think you are? Be quiet!” The trust and the faith that Bartemeous has, even in his bad behavior, apparently in the beginning, that’s what Jesus seems to be looking for, not decorum or quiet. Nothing resonates faith like being willing to appear foolish in front of others.

I remember once there was a young man in a locker room where I was in a martial arts class down in Charlotte. He was telling me that he had a bad relationship with his parents. He had just lost his job. He had been messing around with drugs. He was just aimless and wandering, a twenty-something year-old guy. I was the associate at a church at Grace in Charleston, and I said, “Well, have you thought about maybe coming to church, seeking out God’s guidance and a fellowship of believers to sustain you?” He had told me all his problems, and I lifted up a possible solution. He said, “Church! Church! What good is that going to do me?” I remember in that moment feeling a little embarrassed that I had actually witnessed and put myself on the line in a locker room situation, and then been shot down, and I understand that we are sometimes hesitant to speak up because we’ve spoken up before and been shot down. The crowd tried to shoot down Bartemeous. It says in the Old Testament, the prophet Joel, and also in the New Testament that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. The bold calling out that Bartemeous did was an act of faith. The crowd then is sort of like the crowd now. They want their faith sedate and silent and free from unscheduled distractions. Bartemeous though grabbing at straws, he grabbed at the air. He filled his lungs and he shouted out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” The crowd told him to be quiet.

In verse 48, it says, “They sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” It’s hard to imagine what it would be like to be blind and then suddenly see, but it’s also hard to imagine the depth of trust and faith that Bartemeous had. Jesus can heal us and our broken hearts and our bitter scars and our fears for the future just as He healed Bartemeous. It has been said that many of us live, even though we have money, we have position, prestige and power, that many of us live

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lives of quiet desperation. I believe that. Just wondering why I have these things I have. I have no major problems, and yet I am not happy. I am not joyful. I am not at peace. Dare we cry out here or at home and in our prayers to God, Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me! Give me that peace that you promised! I can't see it! I'm spiritually blind! Give me that comfort and trust that you promised. I can't see it! Give me the way to love and forgive that you promised I would be able to do. I can't see it! I am here. I am healthy, but I am blind to many of your promises. I am broken inside. Jesus, have mercy on me. I have almost everything I've ever wanted, but I can't see you acting clearly in my life. I feel alone. I say the words of faith, but I feel alone. Have mercy on me. From the ditch, don't pass me by. Jesus, don't pass me by.

I've said before, and I admire the medieval prayer tradition called “The Jesus Prayer.” It's very similar to what Bartemeous cried out. The Jesus Prayer is supposed to wrap up the whole Gospel, who God is, and who we are. It goes, “Jesus, Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” In the medieval time, they would pray it with every step, with every breath until it became internalized, the reality of the holiness and the mercy of God and the reality of our need for God's mercy and the fact that we are sinners completely dependent upon God. They prayed it over and over again until it became one with who they were and bound them one with God in dependence and trust. Healing like that can happen in many ways, being bound to God. For Bartemeous, it happened instantly. For the apostles and some of us, it may happen more slowly, but the brave Bartemeous' healing came because he just would not shut up. He would not sit down in shame because others told him to. He knew what he needed. He knew Jesus had it. He cried out for it. He got it, and he followed.

I think that true discipleship always moves along these lines. First, we need to own our deficits, our brokenness, our sin, and our need. Then we come to faith and trust in Christ, and then when the words become cords and connections and mending in our souls, then we follow Him. Need, crying out in trust, and then connection and healing and then we follow. How different is the outcome of Bartemeous from the rich young ruler. I preached a few weeks ago about the rich young ruler. He was one who smugly wanted to add salvation to his list of possessions, just as he possessed so many things, but when he heard that the price for him was going to be to get rid of all his wealth, he couldn't give up his trust in wealth, and so he sadly walked away. He made a choice. He did not follow. The rich man had everything by the world's standards, but he was spiritually bankrupt. Bartemeous was poor by the world's standards and disabled, and he became wealthy spiritually beyond belief because of his trust and his determination. The rich man would not give up his wealth to follow. Bartemeous threw aside his cloak, maybe his only possession, and sprang up to seize the moment when God came near.

It says in Isaiah, “Seek the Lord while He may be found. Call upon Him while He is near.” He followed Jesus even though that road was leading directly to Jerusalem and the cross. In worship, we invoke God's presence, and we know that God is near. We know when two or more are gathered in His name, there God is in our midst. God is here now.

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There is nothing to stop us from calling upon Him now. We can call upon God in each moment even now.

Martin Luther tells us that faith should close its eyes, and should not judge or decide according to what it sees or feels, that we should not judge according to feelings because our hearts can mislead us. And the culture or the fashion of the day may mislead us, and so we should close our eyes to the crowd telling us to be quiet, or close our ears to the crowd if they say, “God doesn’t have time for the likes of you and your small problems.” Yes, God does! We can shut them out, and believe as Bartemeous believed that what faith says to hearts, that we are important to God. Our needs and our brokenness are important to God, and God is willing and able to heal and make us whole. When we cry out, when we really connect, when our faith becomes more than words, our faith changes us, sometimes quickly and radically and sometimes slowly and over a lifetime when you are hardheaded, like me. Now, for the benefit of the grammar police, that’s hardheaded as am I. I’ve been called on that a few times. Is that right? I think it is.

The blind man was able to see. Perhaps there are things yet for you and me to see above and beyond in spite of what the crowd tells us is real or appropriate. As a model of faith, Bartemeous is supreme. He listened to no one. He had every reason to doubt, but he did not give in to doubt. He did not give in to despair. He did not give in to hopelessness. He cried out over and over and over, believing. Now, prayer doesn’t always work the way we want it to. On the other side of that, we don’t always pray. I asked my confirmation class today what they did to relate to God and what they did to relate to others to show how they lived out their faith in that grand theme of loving God and loving neighbor. They said, well, yes they prayed. I said, “Everyday?” They said, well, no. I said do you read the Scripture, I asked them, everyday. They said no. I said well do you relate in a loving way to your neighbors, and I asked everyday? Then they answered back no. We don’t always pray. Prayer doesn’t always work, but we don’t always pray. Maybe we don’t have the peace we want, the love we need, the healing of mind and body and soul we’re after because we quit asking. We give up hope. We all remember that Jesus didn’t heal everybody in every village He passed through, but it does seem that He healed the loud mouths and the persistent and those who wouldn’t take no for an answer, those who even tore a hole in the roof and lowered themselves and their friend down to where Jesus was. We think well that’s rude. They were persistent and insistent and believed and had trust that God could and would bring healing. Absolutely certain in their faith that God could and would do something. It was faith. The Syro-Phoenician woman. It was faith of Bartemeous. Faith of the friends of the man who was lame, who was lowered through the roof. It was faith of the woman who grabbed His garment, and wouldn’t let go. Faith, it led them to stubborn, persistent and audacious prayers and cries for help. I think that gives us an example that we, too, should cry out believing God is able, able to make a difference, able to give us strength, able to heal mind, body, and soul. Let us not fail to take comfort and to take direction from Bartemeous’ example. Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, and Son of David, have mercy on me. There are parts of me, which are broken. Amen.