

Toss it Away, Straightway! -- Pent+25B

This Gospel of Mark's we have been considering all Summer and Fall has its own character. The stories crackle with raw emotion and stern admonition. They don't seem to be prettied up or refined – they're dusty and creaky like old saddle leather – they're quirky and corny and deliberate, like my ancient Mixmaster, with its spinning bowl and odd settings like “juicing,” “fruit cakes,” and “more pulp.” And they work just as well, which is to say very well.

Mark sets down the narrative of Jesus' life and ministry the way he thinks future readers (like us) might just be able to hear it, with lots of symbolism and movement and urgency. Today's story in particular has the feel of a legend, with its memorable names and timeless action: “What do you want me to do for you, Bartimaeus?” ... “Immediately he regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way.”

Scholars and preachers argue over whether Bar-Timaeus means ‘Son of Honor’ or ‘Son of Impurity;’ we can either talk about him as the honorable example of what we should do, or as a wretched example of a fellow whom Jesus must help before he can amount to anything. Like so many expressions in human language, the right answer is, “both.” Either way, we understand that we are supposed to pay close attention, something bigger than just a routine healing is going on here.

Hence that word ‘immediately;’ it comes up dozens of times in Mark's Gospel. In the first English translation, the King James Bible, they used the (now obsolete) word, ‘Straightway!’ Straightway this! and straightway that! “Straightway, he regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way.” It's storytelling with an urgent purpose. Straight tells us that there

is a course to follow that can be clearly determined. "The Way" was the name given to the following of Jesus before the word 'Christian' ever came into use. 'Straightway,' therefore lends a sense of inevitability, conviction and speed to the events described. They must happen; they must happen now, and with good reason. This is a vibrant and iconic story. An Aesop's Fable after a triple mochaccino.

Jesus is moving towards his destiny in Jerusalem. We heard about the first steps in that final earthly journey. Today we hear that, as the road goes through Jericho, the crowds of pilgrims headed for Jerusalem are beginning to build. Straightway, a loud voice is heard above the dusty throng: "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!" ..."Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!!" The storyteller lets us know it felt like an unnecessary and distracting digression. The townspeople tell Bartimaeus to shut up.

What is Mark the Evangelist saying to us here? We've already seen plenty of healings and heard plenty of teachings. Why do we have to stop...just stop! -- whatever we're doing -- for this guy? Either he's a son of misery, or calling him son of honor is a big ironic joke. We need to get to Jerusalem for the real action. Get down beggar, the Man's got more important things to do than deal with you.

I heard a story told by Otis Moss the other day -- he's a well-known preacher from Chicago -- about his childhood on the South Side streets. There were two basketball courts in his neighborhood, one for the big boys and one for the little boys. Only some combination of dropout, injury and luck would ever allow you to move up to the big boy's court. So when we see Jesus moving towards Jerusalem to play on the big boys' court, the last thing he's supposed to do is stop for a game of horse on

the little boys' court with an obnoxious blind beggar who's got a funny name.

Who is this Bar-Timaeus, anyway? This honorable son of misery? Jesus has been getting famous, dealing with rich men and veteran disciples, talking about the Kingdom. What is it about the blind man that catches his attention? Perhaps it is the raw cry of desire – “You have what I want!” – that moves the Son of God.

For the first time, Jesus answers to a King's name -- the Son of David -- and lets himself be publicly identified with the ancient throne of the Jews. When he is killed in Jerusalem, they will indeed kill a king, so Jesus must come to accept the full implications of his destiny, and the names that go with it.

“Have mercy!” bellows the man, not just any blind man, mind you, but Bar-Timaeus, the most honorable #1 son of misery. Until now, Jesus has been healing good, faithful, nameless people – anybody. But this symbolic engagement is with a very specific someone. In order to be the Savior of us all, Jesus must first engage with the least of us, the Son of Misery. And no amount of chiding or bullying or obfuscating is going to stop that misery's child from calling out “Have mercy!”

Yesterday's paper had two interesting articles, one describing how, although “A multitude of factors — including elevated violent crime rates in many black neighborhoods — makes it hard to document racial profiling in police work, an analysis of tens of thousands of traffic stops and years of arrest data in one racially mixed American city showed wide racial differences in measure after measure of police conduct. Officers pulled over African-American drivers at a rate far out of proportion with their share of the local driving population.

They chose to search black drivers or their cars more than twice as often as white motorists — even though they found drugs and weapons significantly more often when the driver was white. Officers were more likely to stop black drivers for no discernible reason. And they were more likely to use force if the driver was black, even when they did not encounter physical resistance.” Have mercy indeed.

Meanwhile, FBI director James B. Comey is saying that additional scrutiny of police officers (in the wake of recently publicized incidents of police brutality) has led to less aggressive policing, and a consequent increase in violent crime. Thus the head of our nation’s most prominent law enforcement agency, is publicly espousing a theory that is far from settled: that increased attention on the police makes officers less aggressive and emboldens criminals. He acknowledged that there is “so far” no data to back up his assertion, that it is one of many factors that may be contributing to the rise in crime, “But I do have a strong sense that a chill wind that has blown through American law enforcement over the last year.” The implication of course is that, if we value our lives and property, we should tell these children of impurity to stop complaining, and be quiet so the real citizens can get on with their business.

The question I have to ask is: Who is the blind one? When we are being miserable – holding onto whatever prejudiced reactivity, habitual violence and institutionalized oppression is driving our behaviors – how can we we ever know to to call for help? How can we even recognize our own blindness, unless we listen to the voices of the powerless? How can we be aware that Jesus is always passing by and eager to share the healing power of God’s grace? Bartimaeus knows perfectly well how blind he is physically, but seeing involves the mind, the emotions and the will too; you don’t need eyes to see God. So

who was really blind, Bartimaeus, or the people who tried to shut him up?

When Jesus called him, Bartimaeus “sprang up, threw off his cloak and came...” The story says he was blind, not crazy. The cloak was the prize, sometimes the only possession of these beggars. At night it was their bed, by day it lay on the ground collecting the coins tossed by passing pilgrims. To throw it away was unthinkable, unless you knew that you would be able to see your way back to finding it.

It’s not that Bartimaeus believes Jesus can help him, he knows it. No doubt that knowledge is in the sound of his voice, and Jesus hears it. How radically different that is from so many of us who want to interview God for an internship in our lives, put Jesus on probation, while we see whether or not we like what he can do for us. But Bar-Timaeus yells out loudly and in earnest certainty.

We are all given our personal and our societal opportunities to meet Jesus along the way. These are the moments when what is wrong with us is clear, and so is the solution. The situation in which Bar-Timaeus finds himself demands an immediate, a straightway response. Bart has a sudden encounter with his own reality: This is who I am, a blind man, and here is what I can do about it: Ask for help. Called by name, in his own language, he springs up and comes to Jesus, leaving everything behind, even before he is healed. In his own way already seeing, he knows, so he follows.

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Bart has every reason to distrust God who, most people thought was punishing the blind. But Bart sees, throws away his cloak and follows. We have lots of reasons not to examine ourselves

and move into new ways of integrity and justice, but can we toss off the old cloaks for good? We cannot forget that the Word of God is inescapably prophetic, and so a life lived in faithfulness to the Word will inevitably have prophetic, difficult dimensions. Can we spring up and follow anyway, even while we know we're still blind? How many cloaks will we have to toss away?

Mahatma Ghandi collected prayers for peace from many traditions and cultures. Here is one from the Bahai that describes the 'Way' Jesus would help us see:

*Be Generous in prosperity
And thankful in adversity.
Be fair in judgement
And guarded in speech
Be a lamp for those who walk in darkness
And a home to the stranger.
Be eyes to the blind
And a guiding light to the feet of the erring.
Be a breath of life
To the body of humankind,
A dew on the garden of the human heart,
Be yourself fruit upon the tree of humility.*