

Doing Our Little Bits
By Reverend Litton Logan
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Scriptures:

Mark 10:46 through Mark 10:52 (NRSV)

⁴⁶They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bar Timaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. ⁴⁷When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁸Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁹Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." ⁵⁰So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹Then 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." ⁵²Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way. (The Message: New Testament)

Sermon:

There is much debate among NT scholars about the who, when, and where regarding the Gospel of Mark. These things are important because they would have influenced how the gospel writer understood and presented the good news and what sources he used. To this point, the author downplays or avoids events in his recent past, such as Nero's persecution of Christians in 64 C.E., and the Jewish rebellion of 66-70 C.E., and his location, whether Rome or somewhere in ancient Syria. The author with a sense of urgency instead focuses on his expectations of the coming of the kingdom of God and Jesus' role in it.

In Mark's Gospel, the healing of Bartimaeus or more properly bar Timaeus, son of Timaeus, the author wraps up Jesus' teachings on discipleship with a healing story in Jericho, Jesus' last stop in Galilee "on the way" to Jerusalem. Once Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, he only teaches or preaches, no more healings or exorcisms.

Throughout Mark's Gospel, no one except the reader and the demons and maybe a Roman soldier truly recognize who Jesus is. However, Jesus' purpose was made clear from the outset of the gospel. After Jesus' baptism, when the fabric of reality opened to reveal Jesus as the beloved son of God, Jesus declares that the kingdom of God has come on earth, yet to be fulfilled. So, people need to turn from living life as usual, believe and behave as kingdom citizens now.

Some people expected the kingdom of God to come on earth through a holy war led by a warrior-king-messiah from the lineage of King David. Others thought it would come when the Messianic prophet, one like Moses, would come, calling and leading people into such a degree of righteousness that God would be prompted to send the prophet Daniel's "one like the Son of Man" with a heavenly host to evict the polluting presences on the land and reestablish Israel.

However, in both expectations, God's people must do their bit, and then God in the fullness of time would step in and do the final bit. The obvious difference being that in the militant-apocalyptic model a lot of God's people could be killed, as was the case during the Jewish rebellion. In the righteousness model, only Satan, his demons, and their human followers would be destroyed. Thus, the author makes the case for Jesus and the righteousness model, given the obvious failure of the militant model in the Jewish Rebellion of 66-70 C.E. However, even this

model with the dynamics of a divine overthrow and regal expectations for Jesus and his followers would have posed inherent dangers for its proponents, regardless of when or where Mark' writes.

In the thinking of Jesus' day, bar Timaeus' blindness would have been understood as a divine punishment for some sin, especially since Mark indicates that he was once a sighted person. As the story goes, bar Timaeus sits begging and he hears a commotion, "What's going on?" he asked. He was told, "Jesus the Nazarene is passing by, and so he began to cry out, "Son of David, Jesus! Mercy, have mercy on me!" Some fearful people tried to hush bar Timaeus, but he yelled all the louder, "Son of David! Mercy, have mercy on me!"

Bar Timaeus yells out the title "Son of David," which carried the connotations of the militant, messianic figure and holy war. Therefore, bar Timaeus' cries at the time could be construed as seditious and dangerous for him and anyone seen to agree with him or associated with him. Thus, people try to shush bar Timaeus before he draws official attention to himself and them, which may have forced them to make a stand either for or against Jesus.

However, I would like for us to notice that Jesus asked the same question of bar Timaeus that he asked of James and John, when they petitioned him for positions of power and honor in the coming kingdom--"What do you want me to do for you?"

Bar Timaeus' request of Jesus carries some unique cultural implications. Since bar Timaeus was a fellow Israelite, once he had recognized Jesus as a holy man and honored him as the Son of David, identifying himself as a social inferior, Jesus would have been understood as having an obligation to pay a sin debt for the son of Timaeus; that is, heal him.¹ As a side note, let me interject that there were no expectations in Judaism that the Messiah would be a healer. However, the son of David, Solomon, was reputed to have been a man of wisdom and healing. Many holy men of the day often healed or attempted to heal in the name of Solomon. So, bar Timaeus could have been calling on Jesus' Solomonic lineage.² Remember in this culture kind begets kind and one's lineage defines expectations.

I would now like to explore some of the implications of Jesus' question to James, John, and blind bar Timaeus. However, I will rephrase it a little, "What do you want Jesus to do for you or us?"

I often think some modern Christians see Jesus as sort of an imaginary, spiritual playmate or a sorcerer, who lives in another dimension of time and space and is under an obligation to manipulate the forces of reality to grant them their wishes, their needs, or forgive their sins simply because they carry the name Christian. To this I add, when it comes to seeing and understanding God's claim on their lives, many Christians don't see what they think they are seeing and become confused like the Polish immigrant, who went to the DMV to apply for his first driver's license.

First, of course, he had to take an eye test. The DMV clerk showed him a card with the letters:

'C Z W I X N O S T A C Z.'

¹ Bruce Malina;Richard L. Rohrbaugh. Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels (Kindle Locations 4149-4155). Kindle Edition.

² Horsley, Richard A. Jesus and Magic: Freeing the Gospel Stories from Modern Misconceptions (pp. 135-136). Cascade Books, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition.

"Can you read this?" the clerk asked.

"Read it?" the Polish immigrant replied, "I know the guy."

I also find it very ironic that some Christians today seek only enough of the transforming power of the Christ to help them change and manage their moral behaviors as they look forward to their salvation in death only. In the main, I guess, this is not all that bad, since survival or even an awareness of our continuance beyond this life seems hard wired into our being. However, what can become wrong with this perspective, and I think among some has become wrong, is they fixate on their personal salvation in death at the expense of doing their little bits to bring the kingdom of God on earth now.

Again, I must reiterate that in Mark's Gospel the Good News of Jesus is all about the kingdom of God having come on earth; its ways and means, and the standards of kingdom citizenship. This means that Jesus' followers, undergirded with the promises of God's supportive presence, are to be proactive not only in living by kingdom standards but telling others about the kingdom of God and its ways of citizenship. In this, they are by default citizens of the kingdom that is here now and yet to be. So, there is little wonder that the world seems to be going to hell in a hand basket because so many people have given up on the kingdom of God and its blessings now. Because bringing the kingdom of God on earth seems such a formidable task many have selfishly embraced the various religious, doctrinal formulas of a mortuary religion. That is, they have a hope of God's joy in death only.

Now, given the ancient's understanding of physiology, the light that one sees by comes from the inside and shines out on to the world. Therefore, bar Timaeus is no longer projecting darkness or blindness in to the world but his unique light of God's healing compassion. Many ancients believed that the light of seeing originated in the human heart. This gives a whole new twist to the little song "This Little Light of Mine" doesn't it?

In summary, bar Timaeus was blind and had not seen the physical Jesus; he had not seen Jesus' wondrous works of healing and feeding, but he had heard about these things and in the desperation of his life, he reached out in the knowledge of God's compassion to ask for healing. In addition, bar Timaeus' faith in God's power and willingness to heal him on the occasion of Jesus' passing caused him to abandon his cloak - most likely all that he as a beggar possessed - and followed Jesus "on the way" to Jerusalem. Bar Timaeus stands in stark contrast to the rich young man, whose riches carried the implications of sinful gain either by him or his forefathers, who would not repent, give up his riches, and turn his life around to follow Jesus.

Yet, in the end, even bar Timaeus didn't really see Jesus any clearer than anyone else, did he? Bar Timaeus continued to think of Jesus as the militant, Davidic messiah. Jesus would betray such understandings, causing bar Timaeus along with others who were blind to his true identity to abandon him in his hours of trial and agony.

However, I have often wondered about the circumstances of bar Timaeus' learning about Jesus. I mean, how did he know that Jesus was a powerful holy man, potentially the Son of David, the Messiah? Of course, we know the answer to such a question don't we - someone told him, or he overheard someone talking about Jesus. Mark 1:28 reads, ²⁸*News about him [Jesus] spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.*

Upon hearing of Jesus' approach, bar Timaeus saw the possibility of being restored to his former state of self-reliance, honor, and full participation in the life of his family, his community, and his faith world. However, please take special notice that Jesus did not heal him as he had previously healed two other blind men. Jesus did not pay bar Timaeus' sin debt. In short, bar Timaeus regained his sight and the power to enjoy his life through his own faith in God's compassionate forgiveness occasioned by Jesus' passing "on the way" to Jerusalem.

I don't know what happened to bar Timaeus. Tradition gives us some possibilities. I certainly think he was in the crowd when Jesus entered Jerusalem, still praising and proclaiming him as the long-expected, warrior-priest-king, Son of David. I don't think he was in the crowd that cried, "Crucify him, crucify him," but you can never tell about people when their heroes disappoint them. I do know, however, bar Timaeus, did not come to Jesus' defense, during his inquisition by the Jewish leadership. We also gather that he was not standing at the foot of the cross at Jesus' death.

Despite this, I still like this story of blind bar Timaeus. I say this because bar Timaeus' faith that God will forgive sins leading to healing-restoration even if we don't always fully understand the nuances of God's presence in Jesus is very comforting. What I also know is that if people will acknowledge Jesus as the Anointed One of God and see him and his teachings as the cure for all that ails humanity, the fullness of the kingdom of God gets a little closer with each convert and each act of compassion.

Humankind has not changed in many, many thousands of years. We are still creatures driven by our fears and anxieties to seek power in and over life and what lies beyond. In the Gospel of Jesus Christ, our anxieties are met with the power of a divine truth that can only be comprehended by the soul. If we are open to this divine truth in Jesus Christ, it will abate our anxieties about the uncertainties of life and death, and we can truly enjoy this life as we go about doing our little bits for the kingdom of God, as we wait for God to do the final, big bit.

However, before people can acknowledge Jesus as the Christ of God and experience the healing power of divine truth, they must hear or overhear the Gospel of Jesus Christ if it is to energize their faith in God's willingness to heal and restore damaged and anxious souls.

Therefore, when we read Jesus' question, "What do you want me to do for you?" or "do for us," I pray we will read our text very closely and listen when Jesus tells us about the power of our faith in God to forgive us and heal us, as opposed to asking him to pull a salvation rabbit out of a hat or do some healing trick for us. Jesus was not a sorcerer or a magician. Jesus was the one who came to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God now and yet to be and brokered a ransom for many to those eternal ends.