

Job 42:1-6, 10 ~ Mark 10:46-52

Go For Broke

22nd Sunday after Pentecost ~ Service of Healing and Wholeness

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The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Scripture

Before you are tempted write this story off as another ableist message that leaves everyone living with a disability feeling like a “less than”, crying out to be heard on the side of the Jericho Road, I have good news. This is *not* the core truth of this story. In fact, if you look with your eyes wide open, you will discover a message that is quite the opposite. Blind Bartimaeus, *before* his eyesight is restored, demonstrates greater vision, deeper insight than even Jesus’ inner circle of disciples. Blind Bartimaeus, while blind, is the hero here.

This is not the first time in Mark that we are taught and inspired by the wisdom and faith of those outside the mainstream, those considered “the least of these.” From Jesus’ first healing in Mark 1, of the man known as the “demoniac”, to today’s healing of Bartimaeus, which is his last healing before entering Jerusalem: the ones who get it, the ones who see Jesus for whom he really is, are the very ones who are being shushed or sidelined by the mainstream “abled” folks. The woman with the twelve-year flow of blood, unclean, alone, pushed through the crowd, like Blind Bartimaeus, and yet to both of them, Jesus said, “Your faith has made you well.” Faith and wisdom that they had *before* Jesus cured them.

Nor is this the first time that the disciples are the ones who seem to be blind to what Jesus is teaching them. I think Mark wants us also to remember, as we listen to this story read, how differently Jesus’ conversation went with the rich man who asked Jesus what he must do to follow him. That man walked away from Jesus, shocked and grieving. The rich man who had many coats.

Another rich man, Job, had 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 55 yoke of oxen and 500 donkeys, as the story goes. Yet he did not really see God until all this, his health, and his family were taken from him. As we heard in our first scripture lesson, not until Job was literally “broke” and broken were his eyes opened to see God, ready to yield and to follow God’s way.

Sermon

So what about that cloak? Let’s talk more about what it would have meant to Bartimaeus. And then we’ll think about our “cloaks” that we may or may not be ready to throw off. As Luis Menéndez-Antuña, Assistant Professor of New Testament at Boston University School of Theology explains, “The cloak here is not only an aesthetic garment. For individuals living below poverty levels, the cloak is a piece that provides warmth in hostile weather conditions, a valuable piece that would allow them to sleep at night or to throw it in front of them to collect money. The cloak for Bartimaeus represents the little power he owns.”ⁱ

We are told that Bartimaeus is poor. But he is even more down and out than we may realize. Bartimaeus was actually the marginalized of the marginalized – not only is he blind (strike 1), and a beggar (strike 2), even his name, Bar-Timaeus means literally son of the defiled/unclean (strike 3) Bartimaeus is the poorest of the poor. Bartimaeus is an outsider in multiple ways, literal and figurative: he is outside of the city, outside of the path, outside of the light, and outside of the economy, Bartimaeus, embodies a life of social exclusion. I hear an invitation to expand the layers of exclusion for us today to include: the unemployed, the disenfranchised, the non-gender conforming, the unheard, the unseen, the discounted. Yet it was Bartimaeus' voice, the poster child for social exclusion, that Christ heard and stopped for. It was the voice of a man unwilling to accept his situation. By throwing off his cloak, Bartimaeus chose to literally go bare before Christ. A man who went for broke, demanding that God act on his deepest desire.

I have two other heroes to lift up for us learn from, one man from the middle of the 20th century and a young woman other who is going for broke right now. Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, in her book, *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal*, sets up the story about her Uncle, like this:

My uncle was a hero. Like all of the men in my mother's family, he was a physician, a general practitioner and later a pathologist. During World War II, he was caught up in action for which he received a medal. The story went like this:

My uncle was one of a group of physicians following the troops. Acting on false information, the soldiers pressed forward believing the ridge on which they were advancing had been cleared of enemy fire. As they moved out of cover, the hidden enemy opened fire and within seconds the field was covered with wounded and dying men. The enemy continued to blanket the area with live fire. No one could stand upright. It was more than twelve hours before air reinforcements could cripple the enemy position. My uncle, crawling on his belly with supplies strapped to his back, placed tourniquets, stopped bleeding, took messages sometimes written on the back of worn photographs, and gave last rites, during all that time. When reinforcements came and the enemy was pulled back it was clear that he has saved dozens of lives.

He was decorated for this action and his picture was on the front page of our hometown newspaper, the New York Daily Mirror. I was about seven at the time, and with a real hero in my family, I instantly became the talk of the second grade. Best of all, he had been given leave and was coming to visit us. I was giddy with excitement.

Secretly, I was surprised by these events. My uncle was short, balding, and wore glasses. He even had a little potbelly. Perhaps he would look different now. But he didn't. Always a shy man, he seemed uncomfortable with all the fuss and uneasy as neighbor after neighbor came by to shake his hand. Finally, I told him how brave I thought he was and I was sure he was never afraid of anything. Smiling, he told me that this was far from the case. That he had been more frightened than ever before in his life. Severely disappointed, I blurted out, "But why did they give you a medal then?"

Gently he explained to me that anyone who wasn't afraid in situations like war was a fool and they don't give medals to people for being fools. That being brave does not mean being unafraid. It often means being afraid and doing it anyway.ⁱⁱ

My second story by the story of another "ordinary hero" is one that I just heard this week told by Elaine Denny, the story of Isamar at the end of the "Forum for All" she taught last Sunday in the Parlor, on "Immigration Perspectives from Guatemalan Deportees." Elaine shared illuminating data gleaned from her project that involved extensive research interviewing deportees primarily from Guatemala: why they chose to attempt to immigrate and what that long, arduous, expensive journey truly entailed. The main reason, by far, driving their journey north is the desperately poor economic conditions. Talk about going for broke.

But the story of Isamar is different. She is a young adult in her twenties from El Salvador who does not want to migrate to the U.S. Isamar loves her homeland and wants to do everything she can to make life better for others right where her family and community live. The local harvests of corn and coffee no longer sustain them because of increased manufacturing that is outsourced. Elaine has known Isamar for ten years, beginning when she was working in a sock factory (essentially a sweat shop) to support her family, and was longing to do better for her people. Through the "Scholarships for Salvadoran" program that Elaine is a part of, Isamar has been able to attend college for five years part time, while working. To get to school she has to take a two-hour bus ride each way. To do her homework she literally has to climb a mountain to get enough whiffs of internet to upload her class work. Yet she persists in this hard life in order to become a social worker for her people. Even though she knows it is a gamble as to whether there will be work for her when she graduates. Talk about going for broke. Her faith is already making her community better. Knowing her story lifts us all.

Bringing it now close to home, the question I hear for you and for me is this: What coat of protection or privilege are we afraid to throw off at the sound of Christ's call? Perhaps that coat of protection and privilege is blinding us to the plight and the suffering of those crying out on the side of the road. Or perhaps we are stuck in an abusive relationship, or have an addiction that we know we need to break out of. Like Rachel's Uncle said, of course you're scared. But do it anyway. I bet that that Bartimaeus was scared. But he went for it, anyway. And his restoration gave him the courage to leave Jericho and follow Jesus on the way to the cross. The cross where Jesus went for broke, for you and me, and for all of humanity. That we could be restored. Can we?

Please pray with me, as I read this song/prayer: "A Hymn of Remorse" by Brian McLarenⁱⁱⁱ
 We covered over your colorful earth with gray cement.
We cut down trees and stripped the soil wherever we went.
We scarred the hills for gold and coal, blind with greed inside our soul,
Our goal: to have complete control.

Lord, have mercy. Can we be restored? Lord have mercy.

*What of the lands of tribes and nations who lived here first?
Who took the best with broken treaties, and left the worst?
By whom were slaves bought, used, sold?
Who valued humans less than gold?
Who told us racist lies until our hearts went cold?*

Lord, have mercy. Can we be restored? Lord have mercy.

*The noise of traffic is drowning out the songbird's song.
Your voice within us is telling us that we've gone wrong.
You call us from our selfishness, to be blessed—and to bless.
To turn to you, to begin anew.*

Lord, have mercy. Can we be restored? Lord, have mercy.

Friends, we are here worshipping together today, because we know, deep in our hearts: We cannot heal ourselves. We cannot heal the wounds of our world on our own. No matter how hard we may try. We can only let the mercy-ing Light permeate us. Here's the amazing thing: If we listen to the Voice of Mercy above all those others voices and self-images, we will become less anxious about how we are doing or looking. If we choose to listen to the Voice of Mercy, then we can spend less energy pretending, maintaining, judging, trying harder and harder to have complete control. We can throw off those coats. And instead, we can use our energy to respond authentically to real persons and real needs.^{iv} No matter how afraid we may be.

May we, like Job, come to see God with our own eyes. May we, like Bartimaeus, go for broke, with the eyes of our hearts wide open, and follow Christ on the healing path. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-30-2/commentary-on-mark-1046-52-5>

ⁱⁱ "The Ordinary Hero," by Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D., [*Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal*, (Riverhead Books: New York, NY, 1994), pp 49-50.]

ⁱⁱⁱ "Hymn of Remorse," Lyrics by Brian McLaren, *from Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation From the Center for Action and Contemplation, Saturday October 23, 2021.*

^{iv} This idea and some of the language in this paragraph came from: "Unfolded and Enfolded by Mercy," by Elaine M. Prevallet, *The Weavings Reader: Living with God in the World*, John S. Mogabgab, ed., (Upper Room Books: Nashville, TN, 1993), p. 179.