

## Asking the Right Question

Mark 10:46-52

Second Baptist Church, Memphis

October 29, 2006

Dr. Brent Beasley

The question is: What do you want Jesus to do for you?

Last week when I was preparing to preach on the book of Job and the problem of suffering in the world, I thought a lot about Jewish philosopher Elie Wiesel's book, *Night*.

In this book, Wiesel tells of growing up in a village in Hungary before being sent to a Nazi concentration camp. As a boy he befriended Moshe, the poor man who cleaned his synagogue. One day Moshe saw Elie in the synagogue praying. Moshe asked him, *Why do you pray?* Moshe proceeded to tell Elie about the way of questions. *Every question possesses a power that does not lie in the answer. Humans raise themselves to God by the questions they ask.*

Elie then asked, *And why do you pray, Moshe?*

*I pray*, said Moshe, *that God will give me the strength to ask him the right questions.*

I said last week that our faith is not primarily about finding the right answer. It may well be more about finding the right questions than finding the right answers. More than giving us the right answers from God, I think the Bible teaches us to ask the right questions of God and of ourselves and our lives. It is in the asking rather than the answering.... We raise ourselves to God by the questions we ask.

You're blind; you're calling out Jesus' name. And Jesus asks you, *What do you want me to do for you?* Sounds like a dumb question. I mean, who doesn't want to be healed, right?

I was thinking, though, of the beggar in the movie, *Monty Python's Life of Brian*. Brian and his mother are walking through town and get hit up by a beggar. *Alms for an ex-leper. Alms for an ex-leper, please.* And Brian says: *What do you mean, an ex-leper?* and the leper says: *Well, I was cured. Who cured you? That Jesus fellow.* He says: *Now I have a hard time making a living; all I've ever known how to do is beg.*

And Brian says: *Well why don't you go back and ask him to make you a leper again?* And the leper says: *Well, I might not like that. Maybe he could just make me a leper during working hours or something.* So Brian just sighs, drops a coin into his cup and walks away. And the ex-leper looks into his cup and says: *A half a denarius Look at this — he only gives me a half a denarius*

And Brian says: *Some people are never satisfied.* To which the leper replies: *That's just what Jesus said!*

What do you want Jesus to do for you? Do you really want to be healed? Do you really want your life changed? Do you really want to see? Seems like an easy question.

Or maybe, maybe, maybe, it's one of the most profound questions you'll ever ask yourself. Maybe just by asking it honestly you raise yourself toward God. What do you want Jesus to do for you? Do you want to see? Do you really want to see?

Jesus is leaving Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. On the edge of the city, a blind beggar, Bartimaeus, knowing that Jesus is going by, cries out, springs up, and speaks straight from his heart. His faith is undeniable, *Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*

Jesus acknowledges his faith and immediately the man's eyes are opened and he can see. Then, rather than going back home, he chooses to become a disciple, following Jesus on the way, which interestingly, now is the way to Jerusalem.

It is a perfect story, full of courage, compassion, faith, even complete with a happy ending.

And it is also a story about us. Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor says: *It is a story about the kingdom of God, and we want it for our own: to encounter Jesus, to be called to him by name, to find the words to tell him what we want, and to be healed, illumined, made whole.*

*That is what we want, isn't it? To trade whatever blindness each of us has got, to trade it in on sight, so that we can see – see ourselves, see our world, see Jesus clearly without cloud or shadow. That is what we want, isn't it?*

Well, isn't it? Do you really want to see?

Annie Dillard is one of our best writers. Her classic book is called *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. In this book is a chapter simply titled, "Seeing," a chapter in which she quotes extensively from a book called, *Space and Sight*, by Marius von Senden, which is about the first people in the world, several of them young, to undergo successful cataract surgery.

All blind from birth, they suddenly received their sight and then were interviewed about what they saw. Their stories are both strange and moving, and some not a little sad, as they describe the world as a newborn child or an alien might upon seeing it all for the first time.

One newly sighted girl was shown a batch of photographs by her mother. *Why do they put those dark marks all over them?* she asked.

*Those aren't dark marks,* her mother explained, *they're shadows.*

Another girl was so stunned by the radiance of the world that she kept her eyes shut for two weeks. When she finally opened them she saw only a field of light against which everything seemed to be in motion. She could not distinguish objects, but gazed at everything around her, saying over and over again, *Oh God! How beautiful!*

But not everything was beautiful to these who were made to see. Unable to judge distances, they would sometimes reach out for things that were yards away, or bang their shins on pieces of furniture they perceived only as patches of color.

The world turned out to be much bigger than they thought, bigger and infinitely more complex. They began to understand the tremendous size of the world, a world which had once seemed more intimate and manageable.

It took a lot of mental effort. Many actually fell into depression. Some became terribly self-conscious about their appearance, while others refused to go out at all.

The distressed father of one young girl wrote her surgeon that his daughter had taken to shutting her eyes when she walked around the house, and that she never seemed happier than when she pretended to be blind again.

One fifteen-year-old boy demanded to be taken back to the local home for the blind. *I can't stand it!* he said, *If things aren't changed, I'll tear my eyes out!*

Which brings me back to our straightforward, uncomplicated, happy-ending story. Could it be that this story might not be quite so straightforward after all? Could it be that the answer to the question—What do you want Jesus to do for you?—might not be so easy after all.

*Take heart! Get up! He is calling you, yes you!* Bartimaeus literally springs up and goes to Jesus. No hesitation.

Is that what you would do? Is that what any of us would do? Because that is what this story is about – to decision to see or not to see. You could say it is really more of a “call story” than a “healing story.”

In the words of Taylor, *How will we have it? You can stay where you are. You can sit in your familiar dark where all the edges are rounded off so that you will not hurt yourself, where you need only concern yourself with yourself and all that is within your reach.*

*You do not want to make a spectacle of yourself, after all, and it probably will not work anyway. No sense getting your hopes up; no sense thinking of yourself as a person who might see. Stay with what you know.*

A couple of weeks ago I started reading a book called *Fast Food Nation*. It's about the fast food industry. When I got to the chapter where it started telling about where the food at McDonald's and other fast food restaurants comes from, how they grow and process those animals, I quit reading.

I don't want to know. I like my occasional cheeseburger from Burger King. My chicken nuggets from Chik-Fil-A. I don't want to know all that information about where it comes from. That would interrupt my enjoyment of the meal. Ignorance is bliss, you know.

Sometimes blindness is a lot easier to deal with, a lot more comfortable, than sight. There is so much we don't want to see.

Maybe the answer to the question—What do you want Jesus to do for you?—is not so easy after all.

Look at what happened right before this encounter with Bartimaeus. James and John, Jesus' disciples, told Jesus that they had a request to make of him. Look at what Jesus said to them. He said, *What is it that you want me to do for you?*

Today, right after that episode, Jesus hears the call of Bartimaeus. He calls Bartimaeus over to him and says to him, *What is it that you want me to do for you?*

Same question, notice, very different answers.

James and John want a guarantee of status in the kingdom of God. They want to make sure things come out right for them—that they get what they deserve.

Bartimaeus wants to see again.

James and John receive a lecture.

Bartimaeus receives sight.

James and John came to Jesus looking for personal gain, looking to get what they deserved, to add a trophy to their trophy rooms.

Bartimaeus came to Jesus because he had to, because life hadn't turned out the way he had hoped, and he had to hold on to Jesus to keep from drowning. *What do you want me to do for you?* Jesus asks.

Bartimaeus is a beggar; he could've asked for a bag of gold.

He's got no status in the community; he could've asked for the respect of others.

He's unemployed; he could've asked for a job.

He's made his mistakes in life; he could've asked for forgiveness.

He could've asked for anything.

*What do you want me to do for you?* is the question that Jesus puts before him. It's open-ended. Non-directive. A blank check, just waiting to be filled in.

Bartimaeus wants to see. And the result of his being given sight is following Jesus on the way.

After the murderous regime of the Khmer Rouge was swept away in Cambodia, many western doctors went to that broken

country to attend to the survivors of the genocide. They discovered a number of blind women.

Thorough examinations revealed absolutely nothing wrong with their eyes, but they could not see a thing. Further study brought the doctors to a fascinating but deeply troubling conclusion.

These women, who had been forced to watch husbands and children tortured and slaughtered, their villages burned to the ground, had simply chosen to see nothing further.

Something in their psyche just turned off, protecting them from witnessing any more of the terror surrounding them. Not hard to understand why they would just want to turn off the light.

Thankfully none of us are in a situation like that, but blindness can be tempting. We can choose not to see. The darkness can be so safe, so familiar, a world we can control, not much change required, don't have to see what we don't want to see. Let's just let Jesus walk on by.

Or, with Bartimaeus dare we say, *Lord, let me see*. Dare we cry out, spring up, throw caution to the wind, throw propriety to the wind, the fear that keeps us in the dark, let loose of that, too.

*Take heart! Get up! He is calling you!*

What do you want from Jesus? Do you want to see? Are you willing to see or not?

And if you are willing, are you willing to see everything there is, the good along with the awful, the lovely along with the monstrous – in yourself, in everyone you meet, in the world?

Are you willing to bruise your shins, to learn your way around the obstacles and through the newness of it all?

Are you willing to bruise your heart? Are you willing to see Jesus, really, and see the way he has for you to go? Do you really want to see that?

Then go your way, because your faith has made you well. Go your way, seeing as if for the first time. Or, if having finally gained your sight, your own way does not look so appealing anymore, then try another way, try Jesus' way.

It leads to Jerusalem, through a garden, past a cross, to an empty tomb. It is not always easy, not always scenic, not without pain, but wait until you see what is there all the way and at the end, or better yet, who is there all the way and at the end.

What's that you say? You have not been invited. Take heart! Get up! He is calling you!

*[Thanks to Rev. Eugene N. Nelson, Jr., The Community Church of Sebastopol, CA]*

I pray God will give you the strength to ask that question: What do you want Jesus to do for you?