

“Along the Road”

Introduction: When we talk about prayer, we often talk about what we’re going to say. The Lord’s Prayer, for instance, gives us a way to talk to God, about a variety of issues, from his person and program to our pardon, provision, and protection. But what about the other side of the conversation, about the listening side of prayer? If prayer is about good conversation, we can’t be doing all the talking! How does God speak to us?

The fact of the matter is that God speaks to us in many ways – through nature, through others, and through his word. The challenge for us in each case is learning how to listen. I’d like to focus with you on his word this morning, probably the primary way God speaks to us. Our challenge here, I think, is that we can tend to read God’s word for information, viewing the text as an object, as we’ve been taught in school, and moving through it as quickly and thoroughly as possible, asking questions of it with a very analytical, problem-solving approach.

Now, this is not all bad! We certainly want to understand what we’re reading. It’s just that it is incomplete if we stop there as it leaves us as master of the text. What would it look like to allow the text to master – to read – us? Would we be willing to pause, long enough and quietly enough, to let the text of God’s word speak to us? How might we do that?

I. In Jericho

A. I’m going to give us a chance to do just that in a few minutes but first, let’s study this passage before us just a bit. Jesus and his disciples, and now a crowd of folk who have joined them, are on their way to Jerusalem. They have arrived in Jericho, the last stop for pilgrims before making the long ascent up to the holy city for what would be the celebration of Passover. The Jericho town square would have been bustling, people coming and going, probably a good place for a beggar to hang out, anticipating the generosity of those on pilgrimage.

B. We also learn that this beggar, whose name was Bartimaeus, was blind. Significantly, this is not the first blind man we meet in Mark. The first one was a man, you might recall, that Jesus had to touch twice before his sight became clear (Mk. 8:22-26). These two blind men actually serve as bookends for Mark, in between which we see Jesus talking three times about his arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection, events, as we have said, that his followers had trouble seeing clearly. Jesus was needing to open the eyes of his followers so that they could come to a greater understanding of what it meant for him to be the Messiah, and the nature of the kingdom he was ushering in.

C. How Bartimaeus knew it was Jesus who was passing by on the road where he was sitting we can’t be sure. But he wasn’t about to allow Jesus to keep going without trying to get his attention. So, he shouts out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Unlike the first blind man, whose friends brought him to Jesus, this man had no one on his side. In fact, we hear many in the crowd scold him for making a nuisance of himself and tell him to shut up! Evidently, they considered themselves to be gatekeepers for Jesus and assumed, like the disciples who, on an earlier occasion (10:13-14), had tried to shoo away children from Jesus, that so important a figure as Jesus wouldn’t want to be bothered by one of society’s expendables.

D. Undeterred, Bartimaeus shouted out again, and even louder! And Jesus stopped. The crowd, which tried to make the man stop his hollering, often gets things wrong. No one is too insignificant to Jesus, not a leper, not a woman with a hemorrhage, not a little child, and not a blind beggar – all received his care. The Son of David, seen by many with nationalistic, militaristic lenses, did not come, it turns out, to conquer with a sword and take over the government, but to heal with deeds of love and mercy.

E. Interestingly, when Jesus calls him, the first thing Bartimaeus does, before taking a step, is throw off his cloak. Likely, it was the only article of clothing this fellow owned. By day he would spread it on the ground to do his begging and by night, hopefully with pockets now filled with coins, he would use it to sleep. His whole life was wrapped up in that cloak. Could his willingness to toss all that he had aside—what the rich young ruler could not do—indicate his desire to come to Jesus with a willingness and vulnerability that wanted nothing to get in the way?

F. Standing, finally, before Jesus, Bartimaeus hears Jesus ask, “What do you want me to do for you?” On the surface, it may seem like a silly question. Aren’t we supposed to ask what we can do for Jesus? Even more, wasn’t it obvious what this blind man needed? Wouldn’t Jesus have known? Probably. But Jesus would also have known that the naming of our desire, declaring the longings of our heart, is a huge catalyst in our spiritual life. That is, in order for Jesus to be with us in a clarifying, revealing, and healing way, we need to identify and speak our desires and longings, even if they’re not altogether godly!

Interesting that earlier in the day, Jesus had asked that same question to the disciples named James and John. Their answer was that they wanted status and power. In response, Jesus continued the conversation in order help them to think more clearly about what true greatness, and the way of the cross, actually looked like in the realm where Jesus ruled. This is important because it assures us that if we name desires that are not appropriate in the mind of Jesus, but are willing to sit with him in them, he will help us explore and sift through them to see what’s underneath, helping us refine them in a way that leads to life.

I think this is at least part of what the psalmist has in mind when he says: “take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” Jesus refines our desires in life-giving ways as we trust in, commit to, and are still before him, as the psalmist goes on to explain (37:1-9).

To the question Jesus asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” Bartimaeus responded, “Rabbi, I want to see.” Jesus restored his sight, bringing healing to Bartimaeus on many levels, and Bartimaeus fell into step with the group that was following Jesus to Jerusalem. He knew his life needed to be framed differently and that Jesus would be the way. Desire had become his entry point into new life in Christ.

II. Listening Prayer

Now that we’ve read and reflected on the text, let’s take a few minutes to allow the text to read us. We’ll do so by entering the story, putting ourselves in the place of Bartimaeus, and listening for what God might want to say to us. I’ll read the text verse by verse, asking a few questions along the way. You might want to close your eyes to better imagine what being Bartimaeus might have been like, and open your hands in a posture of receptivity.

v. 46 Imagine sitting on the ground in the town square. Life is happening all around you. What do you hear? What do you smell? How do you feel?

v. 47 Jesus, you hear, is nearby, but is about to leave. Do you cry out to him? What do you say? Where would you like him to meet you that no one else has?

v. 48 Hear the voices that are trying to silence you. Who are they? What are they saying? Can you summon the strength to cry out to Jesus above them?

vv. 49-50 Jesus, you're told, wants to see you. He's calling you. What do you need to throw off in order to feel free to come to him? Can you do that?

v. 51a Hear Jesus asking you that question. What longings and desires are you aware of right now? How does it feel to be invited to name them? Take a moment to do so...

vv. 51b-52 As you name your desire, how does Jesus respond? What do you see? Is there an invitation from him to follow him in some new way?

Amen.

This is just one way to help us listen to the text, making space in our minds and hearts for it to read us and for God to speak to us. May the conversation you began with him just now continue in the days ahead.

Let us finish in a spirit of listening prayer as we sing, "Open My Eyes that I May See" #367