

Mark 10:46–52 (NRSV)

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

## Call Him Here

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: October 25, 2015 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Mark 10:46–52

Jesus is on the move. Beginning around chapter seven in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus puts on the miles. [Slide 1] He goes all over northern Israel and beyond: Tyre, Sidon, back to Bethsaida, and then to Caesarea Philippi, and Mt. Hermon. Then he returns to the Galilee area and teaches at Capernaum. It's something of a farewell tour. [Slide 2] From the Galilee he heads toward Judea. [Slide 3] He will not return. He moves swiftly now, and he is preoccupied with his destiny and with his disciples and their persistent misunderstanding of him. "Who is the greatest among us?" some ask. James and John ask to be seated at his right and left in the Kingdom of God. The tension builds at a pace that matches the speed of their steps. Jesus is rapidly moving toward his destiny in Jerusalem. There is little time for his followers or would be followers to get things right. The rich man walks away disconsolate because Jesus has told him that he loves his wealth too much. And three times he tells his disciples of his impending death, and each time his followers remain in denial. And as we know, when the moment of truth comes in Jerusalem, they betray him, deny him and run away.

We join Jesus and his disciples today at Jericho. They are just about to begin the steep ascent from the Jordan valley to Jerusalem. From 825 feet below sea level in Jericho they would climb to 2550 feet above sea level in Jerusalem. They would climb more than half a mile in a matter of about 17 miles. They would climb from blistering desert to lovely Mediterranean breezes, from desert silence to urban bedlam. In a matter of days Jesus would face a brutal end for which Jesus' disciples were unprepared, despite his best efforts. [Advance to placeholder slide]

And yet, Jesus, who grasps all that is coming, keeps healing and teaching. As they are leaving Jericho a blind beggar calls out to Jesus, "Son of David, have mercy on me." Jesus' disciples, as perceptive as ever, tell the man to shut up.

Every time I read this passage I can't help think of the homeless panhandlers in Harvard Square. I imagine, say, the president of Harvard, or maybe even the president of the United States. I imagine them moving through the Square with their protective entourage sweeping the unimportant people out of the way. I imagine the panhandler calling out. And I imagine—it's not too hard is it?—I imagine the protective attendants of the president impatiently silencing him. The clear meaning is this: unlike you we are important. Don't bother the president. And I wonder would Drew Faust, or Barak Obama speak to the panhandler? And I wonder, if I were in their shoes, would I?

Jesus does. Jesus just stands still and says, "Call him here." Jesus pays attention to the blind man. Jesus asks the man what he can do for him. And Jesus heals the man.

Once again Jesus' disciples miss the point and the opportunity, and Jesus shows them how it's supposed to be done. That looks to be the main point of the story, and we wouldn't be wrong to think so. Jesus shows us how to treat blind Bartimaeus.

But there is more to it, too. In this short passage listen to the wording.

Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you."

You might notice that Jesus was calling the man.

Jesus heals the man and then says, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and then the man didn't go. Bartimaeus followed him on the way.

The man didn't go on his way. He followed Jesus on the way. In the New Testament and early Christian texts 'following on the way' is shorthand for following Jesus, or following the way of Jesus, or being a disciple or member of the church. When Bartimaeus followed Jesus on the way, the text signals that the man became a disciple of Jesus.

So here at this point the Gospel is winding down to its stunning and bitter conclusion. And still Jesus is calling disciples. Jesus call Bartimaeus, and Bartimaeus follows him.

How are we to interpret this development? Well, first we can note that though Jesus is but a few days away from his death, he is still calling disciples. Maybe we would be tempted to say that a few days from his death Jesus is calling better disciples than the ones he already has. "Go, your faith has made you well," says Jesus.

But to think that would be to be too harsh on Jesus' original disciples. After all, they dropped their lives on a moment's notice and followed him when Jesus called them, too. They have their foibles to be sure, but they do remain by his side until their final betrayal. Bartimaeus doesn't seem to be a better disciple. We never hear of him again. It's not as though he followed Jesus up to Jerusalem and then intervened in his execution while his first disciples turned and ran. We have no evidence that Bartimaeus performed any heroics.

Maybe we better take a step back and rethink things. Maybe we need to ask who the disciples are and why the story of the Gospel is told the way it is.

Let's compare the Gospel with another story. Homer tells the story of Odysseus, the king of Ithaca and heroic Greek warrior. Homer tells of Odysseus's ten year journey home from the Trojan War. Along the way home Odysseus meets innumerable obstacles. He is captured by a cyclops. The witch goddess Circe falls in love with him and keeps Odysseus for a year. His men are beguiled by Sirens. Their ship passes between the six-headed monster Scylla and the whirlpool Charybdis. Calypso keeps Odysseus as a love slave for seven years. Through all this and more, Odysseus uses his own extraordinary skill and the favor of the gods to survive and finally triumph. Along the way, Odysseus's men are not as clever as he and many are lost in every adventure. When Odysseus finally returns home and his wife and kingdom are restored to him, one thing is clear. Odysseus is extraordinary, one of a kind. There is none other like him. That is a major point of the story. Odysseus is a hero of gigantic proportions, quite different from any other man.

It's not hard to imagine that the Gospel writers could have done the same thing for the disciples. We have this little band of followers of this rather scraggly character Jesus, who later was recognized as the Son of God. It would have been easy to turn them all into heroes. They followed when no others did. They saw what others did not see. They were faithful where others were not. Like all legends there would be a grain of truth in such an exaggeration. The disciples could have been described that way. In fact, it is more extraordinary that they weren't. We get the disciples with all their warts. They aren't extraordinary or legendary. As often as not they are failures. And even so Jesus keeps gathering disciples right up to the bitter end. "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you."

Something about the purpose of the Gospel is going on here. The Gospel isn't a heroic folktale. It's not meant to glorify the origin of the faith. Even Jesus' triumph is a scandal. As

Paul reminds us, his story satisfies neither Greek nor Jew. It's not principally a story of how the Christian faith got started. Sure, it has some of those features. But the Gospel is much more a living, dynamic story.

The purpose of the Gospel is to make disciples. The Good News that is like no other good news is meant to call readers, us, just like it called Peter, James and John, just like it called Bartimaeus. The Gospel is meant to engage us. It's meant to address us: "Take heart; get up, he is calling you."

The Gospel means to be persuasive in this purpose. Discipleship isn't just for heroes. The disciples are real people, with real foibles, just like you and me. When Jesus ate with the poor, the tax collectors and the despised, it was not just to serve them, though it was that. But it was just as much to say to them that they could serve, too; they could be disciples. Like Redd, who spoke to us last week, said, even if you're weak, or down on your luck, or infirm or anything else, you can still be a disciple of Jesus. You can still answer the call to serve.

But there's more. Even after the disciples have accepted the call, after they've said yes and dropped their fish nets, after they've been healed and begin to follow Jesus on the way, they remain imperfect. They backslide. They misinterpret what it means to be a disciple. Their selfishness sometimes overcomes them. At the most important moments they run and hide and say they never knew the man. An interesting fact is that the word that is used to call Bartimaeus is the same word to say the rooster crowed a few days later. In a sense, then, even as Peter is experiencing his most apostate moment, the rooster is both accusing him and calling him once again to discipleship.

The Gospel doesn't want us to think that the disciples are perfect because the Gospel wants to make it crystal clear that our imperfection doesn't let us off the hook. If nothing else the Gospel is persistent. It's like one of those old Army recruiting signs I remember as a kid. They had a picture of Uncle Sam with a caption that read, "Uncle Sam needs you." Uncle Sam had his finger pointing out of the poster, and it was designed so that no matter what angle you saw the poster from, the finger was pointing at you.

"Take heart; get up, he is calling you." He is calling you just as you are. Take Heart. Get up. Amen.