

23rd Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

Mark 10:46-52

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.

His life was miserable by any account. Each day he would wake up from whatever measly shelter he had managed to find the night before. He would rummage through the trash to find a moldy piece of bread. Then, he did his best to brush off the grime that had accumulated on his body from a night on the hard ground and listen for the familiar sounds to find his usual place of begging. He knew the streets well. This painfully dull and dismal routine was repeated ad nauseam more times than he could count.

One could argue that the only thing worse than being blind from birth was being born with sight and having it stripped from you. He had faint memories of color - a vivid sunset, the pink petals of a flower, the deep purple of the robe upon rich man he once saw walking by. But those memories had long faded into the recesses of his brain and were now nothing more than a faint whisper; echoes of a past he worried would never return.

Today was a day like any other. He sat by the road and begged. Long ago he had grown accustomed to having dirt kicked in his face by the passers-by. If he was lucky, one out of a hundred would give him a coin or two. If he was unlucky, he would be taunted and ridiculed by some jackass who walked by. After all, conventional wisdom was that someone with his disability must have done something truly terrible to deserve it. It made sense that people would look down on him - both figuratively *and* literally.

It had all grown far too predictable. He knew exactly what each day would bring - pain, humiliation, and, by far the worst of all, hopelessness. The pain he could deal with; after a while he almost became numb to it. The humiliation he could stomach; because the decades of begging had toughened his skin. But the hopelessness was something he could never get used to. The hopelessness was what drove him insane. The hopelessness was what kept him up at night even when he could manage to find some soft place to curl up and retreat, ever so briefly, from the cruelty of the world he knew he would wake up to all too soon.

But the past few weeks had a slight difference to them than the countless ones that drudged by prior. His usual begging spot, right across from Rupp Arena at the corner of West Main and Broadway, gave him a prime spot to listen to the latest gossip of the day. After all, what else can you do when you're a blind beggar? You

listen. A few feet from his spot was one of those bars that opened up to the street so you could walk right up and order a drink right on the sidewalk.

The past few weeks he had heard whispers about a particular man, someone they called Jesus. Although he struggled to listen to the conversations, the incessant symphony of vehicles driving up and down Broadway made it hard for him to make it out. However, after several weeks, he had managed to piece this much together. This Jesus man was someone that was rubbing a lot of people the wrong way. The blind beggar often listened to the television mounted outside the bar and, more often than not, it was tuned to a news channel. At a time when he heard a lot of talk about nationalism and “America First” from the television, this Jesus fellow was apparently talking about some sort of kingdom that operated very differently. At a time when he heard a lot of people debating pre-existing conditions and outrageous health insurance premiums, he heard that this Jesus guy was healing people and not making a penny off of it. At a time when he heard a lot of people talk about being scared of a caravan of migrants heading for the U.S. border, he heard that this Jesus character was literally going out of his way to care for and love marginalized people just like him.

From his miserable spot on this cruel corner of the world, the blind beggar was intrigued by this Jesus dude.

But, his thoughts about this gentle radical soon took a backseat to the monotony of yet another day begging for something to keep him alive for yet another day of begging. He had been in his spot for about four hours so far. The midday sun beat down upon his leathery skin. He rattled his cup so he could hear how many coins had been pitifully thrown at him. By the sound he estimated there was about four dollars in there, enough to buy a few things off the dollar menu at the McDonald’s down the street.

But then he heard it. The sound of a mass of people approaching him. If he didn’t know any better he would think that a basketball game or a concert had just ended at Rupp Arena. He always kept track of the schedule at the venue because that was the best time to beg. But it was the middle of the day on a weekday; there was nothing going on across the street.

The throng approached him and he extended his hand with his cup to hopefully get another dollar or two off the crowd that was passing by. Who knew, maybe this would be an unexpected blessing, this random group.

But as the crowd passed he began to hear that name again. That name of the peculiar guy that was turning the world upside down. His empty, cloudy eyes widened when he began to hear people chanting: “Jesus, Je-sus, Je-sus!”

He knew it. This was his chance. He very likely would never receive another one. Something bubbled up within him. Some feeling of courage, some feeling of excitement, some feeling of sheer exuberance. But above all, it was stubbornness. A stubborn refusal to accept that his plight of injustice was never going to end. A stubborn refusal to throw away his shot.

He didn’t make the choice; his body did. He found himself rising to his feet, awkwardly grabbing one of the barstools to his side to bring himself up from the dusty ground.

Then, coughing first to clear the dust from his lungs, he called out “Jesus!”

No one seemed to notice. So he collected himself and yelled out even louder “Jesus, have *mercy* on me!”

It came from nowhere. All the sudden he felt someone shove him brutally to the ground. His back hit the side of the building and he could feel the warmth of blood trickle down his hands from where he had broken his fall. He could hear a violent voice yelling, “Shut up, you worthless beggar. Jesus doesn’t have time for the likes of you!”

He felt the sting of shame and worthlessness, a feeling he knew all too well. For a moment he lay crumpled by the concrete, wiping the blood off his hands on his dusty robe. He sighed and rested his head against the building, hearing the crowd turn the corner and head towards Vine Street.

Then he felt the stubbornness well up within him again. Why should he be ok with this? Why should he accept his injustice? Contrary to what the cruel people who passed him on a daily basis believed, he had done *nothing* to deserve this. Even if he *had* done something to deserve this plight, is there no place for mercy in this world? If Jesus had taken the time to heal other people, why not him? What gave those people the right to decide who Jesus should and should not heal?

Again, his body took over and he struggled to get to his feet. As he continued to hear the crowd fading, his hands grasped at the barstool that he had used previously and he climbed upon it, standing above the crowd. Surely, he thought, Jesus would hear him now!

Grabbing the television for support as he struggled to maintain balance atop the barstool, he could hear through the speakers a commentator bragging about how the economy had grown 3.5% in the third quarter as his few coins pitifully rattled as he swayed precariously atop his perch.

Then, gathering up every ounce of his energy, he yelled out at the top of his lungs: “JESUS, HAVE MERCY ON ME!!!!!!”

Panting, catching his breath, the man heard a change in the cacophony. The crowd had stopped. There was some laughter, some people chuckling at the ridiculous scene of seeing this blind beggar yell out at Jesus while standing on top of a barstool clutching a mounted television screen.

But once the laughter receded, he heard, from a distance, a soft and almost-motherly voice say simply, “call him here.”

He heard rustling as someone approached him and grabbed his hand, helping him down from the barstool. He left his cup of coins on the counter as he was guided through the throng of people to the man of whom he had begged mercy.

Even his blindness couldn’t keep him from knowing when he was standing in front of his only hope. There was something different in the air. Then, forces outside of his control compelled him to throw off his dusty, dirty cloak and stand before Jesus, open and vulnerable.

He could feel Jesus smiling at him as he asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?”

The blind man didn’t have to think about what his response would be. Now was the time. This was his moment.

“Jesus, I want to *see* again.”

He blinked and then it happened. He opened his dry eyes and he saw it. It was blurry at first but then he rubbed his eyes and looked again.

His sight was back. He saw red again - on a woman's purse. He turned his head and remembered what blue was like when he saw a man wearing a Kentucky Wildcats t-shirt. He looked above him and remembered what green was like when he saw the sign with the words “Vine Street” on it.

Then he looked at his savior. A short man with dark skin, a black beard, kind brown eyes, and a crooked smile.

As he looked into the eyes of his savior, the no-longer-blind man wondered what had just happened. Jesus had just said something about his faith making him well. He had never considered himself to be a very “faithful” person. He was just a man who had been dealt a tough hand in a cruel world. But something stirred within him that day. Jesus had brought out a stubbornness in him; a stubbornness that he guessed could be the “faith” his healer had just mentioned. A stubbornness to hope in the goodness and beauty of the world despite everything that seemed to indicate otherwise.

His faithful stubbornness, his beautiful act of brash defiance led him to leave his spot at the corner of Broadway and Main.

His first act of obedience was to do exactly the opposite of what his savior commanded him to do next.

Jesus told him to go.

Instead, he followed.