

“A Voice in the Crowd”

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The First Congregational Church of Burlington, United Church of
Christ
Burlington, Vermont

Mark 10:46-52

⁴⁶They 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. ⁴⁷When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁸Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁹Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” ⁵⁰So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹Then 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.” ⁵²Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

A number of years ago, I had the privilege of going to Tanzania. Before we took the long bus ride to the southern part of the country, we had a couple of days to rest up from a long flight in the large port city of Dar es Salaam. Actually, I would not exactly call Dar es Salaam the most restful city in the world. It is jammed with people. One day, we had to go shopping for some supplies and we headed to a very large and congested downtown area full of stalls with assorted merchandise. This area was rarely frequented by white tourists or as the Tanzania’s us Muzungu’s. Muzungu roughly translated is a playful term Tanzanians use to refer to clueless white people. That day in Dar es Salaam we were on a mission to buy fabric and mosquito netting. We did not speak Swahili very well and we leaned heavily on an interpreter, Castor, who could help us to barter with the merchants. In such a situation you need a guide. While I was surrounded by people, I can remember how alone I felt for a time. I was seven thousand miles away from home and found nothing familiar except the smiles on people’s faces and the steady hand of our Tanzania friend. We gratefully ate the local food, prepared on open fires on the sidewalks. But when presented with yet another plate of beans and rice, one member of our group fantasized about asking for a cheeseburger. I’ll have the cheeseburger please he joked. Muzungus, all of us, were pretty lost in the crowd.

Having felt at times in my life here and overseas a little bit like a duck out of water, I have good deal of compassion and sympathy for people trying to find their way in a crowd in a new land. In this city, I feel really blessed to meet people who come from country’s very far away. They help me see the familiar and the obvious

in fresh ways. The other day, Lucy Samara, our outreach coordinator arranged a great tour of some local social service agencies. I decided to invited some companions from Somalia to join me on the tour. As we learned together, Hasan Hersei, The President of the United Somali Council explained, it was difficult for many elderly Somalis to learn the language since many are themselves illiterate in their own language. They are, of course, happy that they no longer have to live in a refugee camp, but this is a strange land. To many Somalis, the food here can seem strange and the language even stranger. Rules and customs can be puzzling. Indeed, there are Somali's who, when presented with a cheeseburger, may say be inclined to say I will have the rice and beans please. They too, like the Mzungus in Tanzania, can feel pretty lost in the crowd.

For those of us who have ever felt lost in an unfamiliar crowd, country or situation, I believe we can draw strength from the persistence of Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus was calling out to Jesus at the top of his lungs to have mercy on him. Son of David, have mercy on me. The crowd around him was not friendly. They sternly ordered him to be quiet. But Bartimaeus was not daunted. Instead, he was very persistent in trying to find his voice and a sense of connection among a crowd of able-bodied people who could see.

If ever there is a time when we find ourselves in an unfamiliar place or situation, we need like Bartimaeus, to speak up and say what we need. Sometimes, of course, we are not even sure what we need. But the way we grow is not by letting life just happen to us. I think we are spiritually dead and blind to the possibilities when we become narrow minded spiritual consumers who expect ideas to conform to our well traveled presupposition where we never challenge ourselves or anyone else. Bartimaeus teaches us that we need to apply ourselves where we eat the food that is less familiar, try the language, and sit at the strange table.

Making the effort to reach out in is this way becomes an act of faith. It's not uncommon in churches to have people from time to time sorrowfully say that no one saw them in the hospital until some one inevitably, asks, well did you tell anyone you were in the hospital. Well no, I just assumed someone would know. Its no fun to be alone when we are not well, but it is also true that we have to be proactive in our healing process. Bartimaeus teaches us that Faith is really about trusting there is a future where God is present. Faith invites us to move towards that future, even if we are not really sure what that future might look like. We can read about Jesus all we want but until we begin trying on his moves and practicing the ways of his life, we are just not going to get it. Practicing our Christian faith is not unlike learning to play baseball, sew or playing the piano.

We can study up on it all day long but until we actually practice sewing, hitting balls and playing the piano, we really can't get the feel for it. So like Bartimaeus, who stepped out in faith to seek healing, we too must venture out. Christianity is about practice, practice and more practice. And that's what learn in church to practice our faith.

While we need to take individual responsibility and take some risks, it also important that institutions take their own risks and reach out as well. Jesus teaches us always to defy the crowd, and accept the joyful burden of creating a place of welcome.

Churches are funny places. We encourage people to take risks but left to our own devices, we forget about Jesus or Bartimaeus and refuse to risk or go that extra mile to help. People knock at our doors but, like the crowd, we have subtle and not so subtle ways, of joining the crowd and ordering people away. But we know that when people are crying out, reaching out, we must, like Jesus hold out a healing hand. For me, the life long project of the church is to look at the ways in which we stunt healing through our lack of hospitality. One possible way to act like the inhospitable crowd, for instance is to read this passage about Blind Bartimaeus, and some how suggest to people with disabilities or eyesight problems that they would be cured if they had a strong faith. And if they are not cured, their faith must not be very strong. But while we are twisted up in this narrow theological exercise, we do so little to accommodate people with some physical limitations and help them feel welcome.

We speak of visiting those who are in need of healing but we never get around to making that visit. Jesus teaches us that offering a radical hospitality brings about its own kind of restoration and healing which may or not bring a cure but helps to renew one's soul and spirit. The ongoing work of the church is to remember always that we are the host and that every day we work on pulling down the emotional and physical barriers which impede healing. We must make every effort to humbly let the world know that God is love. Show me a church which bucks the fear and the conventional wisdom of the crowd, and brings Christ to those who live on the edge and the ends of the earth, and I will show you a church which is so alive in faith and love that people will flock to come here. In a few minutes, we will gather for a congregational meeting after church. All are welcome especially those who may be disinclined to come such meetings. You don't to be a member either. All are welcome. At this meeting we will hear about the work of this church, our initiatives, our budgets, our plans and our challenges. It's really important to me that what we do here is not a mystery. As Congregationalists, we want to be open and be clear about what we are up to. All of us share a responsibility to listen, and offer our voice and our opinion.

But as we do our work, let us not forget that how we are organized, how we are funded and what we do is always, always in service of the goal of helping each other practice our faith. It's always about offering the Gospel by serving others and reaching out to those who are searching or may be broken in some way in mind, body and soul. Our ministry is always about having mercy and compassion. So let's buck the crowd, have faith, regain our sight and boldly follow Jesus on the way.