

What Bartimaeus wanted (Mark 10:46-52)

We see in Bartimaeus's story the same basic elements that are present in the calling of Jesus' first disciples.

by [Phyllis Kersten](#) in the [October 20, 2009](#) issue

When you think of Jesus' disciples, who comes to mind? Impulsive Peter and doubting Thomas? Surely. James and John, the Zebedee boys? Of course. Mary Magdalene and some of the other women mentioned in Luke 8:1-3? Yes, if we remember that Luke's list of Jesus' followers was much larger and more inclusive than just "the twelve."

But blind Bartimaeus? Hardly. We think of his story—if we think of it at all—as a healing story of Jesus, on his way to Jerusalem to die, taking time to have pity on one more person in need, a blind beggar by the side of the road in Jericho. But many commentators on Mark see something more. They see a call story.

How would this blind man have heard of Jesus of Nazareth? Maybe it isn't too surprising; maybe news spread like wildfire from town to town among the disabled and marginalized in first-century Palestine—especially when someone appeared who miraculously fed and healed and cared for people like them. Perhaps word had come to Bartimaeus of the blind man brought to Jesus by friends in Bethsaida, and of how Jesus had put saliva on his eyes and restored his sight. Perhaps a relative of Bartimaeus in Capernaum had told him months ago about an itinerant preacher from Nazareth who defied the religious leaders when he restored a man's withered hand.

However it was that Bartimaeus had learned about Jesus, he knew—and he was not going to miss his opportunity when he heard the crowd murmuring that Jesus of Nazareth was coming along the road out of Jericho. Bartimaeus, like many others, was pinning his messianic hopes on Jesus, and so he cried out from his spot alongside the road, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" When those around him tried to silence him he raised his voice and shouted, "Son of David, have mercy

on me!”

It must have seemed to Bartimaeus, with all his other senses so keenly attuned, that time was standing still when Jesus stopped on the road, stood still and commanded: “Call him here.” In case we miss this, the verb *call* is repeated two more times in the next sentence. The same crowd that tried to shut Bartimaeus up now mediated the call to the blind man and opened up a path for him. They called to Bartimaeus, “Take heart and get up. He is calling you.” Bartimaeus didn’t need to be called twice. “Throwing off his cloak,” Mark tells us, “he sprang up and came to Jesus.” Nor did Bartimaeus hesitate when Jesus asked, “What do you want me to do for you?”

“My teacher, let me see again,” Bartimaeus said simply, and Jesus replied, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Mark concludes: “Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.”

We see in this story the same basic elements that are present in the calling of Jesus’ first disciples, Peter and Andrew, James and John. Jesus called them, and the fishermen immediately left behind their nets—the symbol of their old way of life—to follow Jesus. Bartimaeus threw off his old way of life, too—the cloak spread on the ground before a beggar to collect the coins tossed to him—and followed Jesus. Both the calling of Jesus’ first disciples and the calling of Bartimaeus, Jesus’ last disciple mentioned in Mark, began with Jesus’ initiative. Roman Catholic theologian John Shea says that it is the same with us: “Our blind and begging condition makes us ready, but it is the call of Jesus that raises us off the ground” (*The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers: Eating with the Bridegroom*).

Mark’s choice of words about Bartimaeus after he is healed, about Bartimaeus following Jesus “on the way,” is not accidental. The next scene in Mark’s Gospel is Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, but we know that to follow Jesus “on the way” primarily means to follow Jesus on the way to the cross. In Acts 9 and six other places in Acts, the first name given to members of the early church was not “Christians” (that name came in Antioch, in Acts 11), but “people of the Way.” Mark is clearly identifying Bartimaeus as a disciple of Jesus.

And what about the twelve? Yes, they were on the road with Jesus as he made his way inexorably to Jerusalem, but they stand in sharp contrast to Bartimaeus. In the story immediately before Jesus met up with Bartimaeus, James and John wanted something from Jesus, and he asked them the same question he would ask

Bartimaeus, “What do you want me to do for you?” They wanted positions of status and power in Jesus’ coming kingdom. But their ambition had blinded them to the road Jesus would have to travel to bring in the kingdom, the Via Dolorosa, the way of suffering and sorrow, the way of the cross and empty tomb.

Until Christ appears after the resurrection to his disciples in their locked room, until he shows them his wounded hands and feet and side, until he forgives and recommissions them, we are left with only Bartimaeus as our model for true discipleship. Mark I. Wegener, one of several authors of *New Proclamation: Year B, 2003, Easter Through Pentecost*, urges us to be like Bartimaeus—to be “people who are not too proud to ask for mercy, people who are ‘saved by faith,’ people who follow Jesus on the way to the cross.”