Sight to the blind, hearing to the unlistening (Mark 10:46-52)

The crowd's proximity to Jesus does not make them attentive to his priorities.

by [Tito Madrazo](#)

October 26, 2018

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Bartimaeus has a prime location along the road to Jerusalem, just outside Jericho. It is the perfect spot for a blind beggar to appeal to the generosity of those who are beginning their journey up through the hills to the temple. With their mind on spiritual things, they just might be feeling less attached to their material possessions and more inclined to direct a few coins his way. Still today, the roads and steps around sites of worship often become a gathering place for the poor and for those broken in body or in spirit, who hope that religious sentiment might awaken altruism among others.

But that is not the way things work on the day that Jesus travels past Bartimaeus's stretch of road. A large crowd is traveling with him, and we can only hypothesize about their priorities. Some are expecting fireworks, as Jesus is about to make his only visit to Jerusalem recorded in the Gospel of Mark. Others are hoping to receive the Nazarene's miraculous healing or to experience his impressive teaching firsthand. Still others, like James and John, are hoping to more closely align themselves with Jesus so that they might receive positions of honor alongside him.

Whatever their motivations, their proximity to Jesus does not make them generous toward Bartimaeus and his plea. While many people might have simply ignored Bartimaeus, the crowd that day actually rebukes him—chastising him for thinking that he is worthy of Christ's attention (or their own).

But Bartimaeus persists, and Christ responds by restoring his vision. This is the final miracle of healing in Mark's gospel—one last pause on the road to Jerusalem and Calvary to offer not only sight to the blind, but also hearing to the deaf. The gift of sight is for Bartimaeus, but the gift of hearing is just as desperately needed by those who have been willfully deaf to his cries—those who, in spite of their proximity to Jesus and the time they have spent journeying with him, are yet oblivious to his priorities and to his compassion.

This summer I participated in a workshop at the biennial conference of Societas Homiletica, an international academic society for teachers and researchers of preaching. Our purpose was to explore how Hispanic-Latino/a immigrant congregations are discerning and proclaiming the good news of scripture during such a turbulent season. After a brief introduction, the workshop participants divided into several smaller groups led by local pastors—most of whom were or had once been undocumented immigrants—for the purpose of exegeting passages of scripture that touch on human migration.

For the next 40 minutes, these immigrant pastors shared their perspectives and hard-earned wisdom with homileticians from around the world. Then we teleconferenced with an undocumented immigrant named Samuel who was living in the protective sanctuary of a local church. (For more about Samuel, [read my Century column for this Sunday](#) or visit [Sanctuary at CityWell](#).) Afterward, several of the workshop participants spoke of their desire to do a better job of listening within their own contexts—listening to Syrian refugees in northern Europe, listening to indigenous people groups in Australia, listening across cultural divides in India and South Africa.

There are many voices crying out, but so many of us have selective hearing—acknowledging some voices that sound familiar, ignoring others that seem less so, and even attempting to silence those voices that would challenge or inconvenience us too much. The story of Bartimaeus, however, reminds us that in listening to the cry of the stranger, we very well may learn something new about the priorities and compassion of God.