

So, here's some background for our gospel read about the healing of Bartimaeus.

It is important to recognize that health care in the world of Jesus depended on one's economic status. If one were wealthy, you had the luxury of hiring a personal physician and would be cared for at home.

If one were less wealthy, but still had resources or connections, you would probably go to one of the healing centers that were dedicated to various gods. Treatments would include the use of herbs, sleep therapy, the arts (especially music, theatre, and dance), along with various prayers and religious offerings.

For both the wealthy and those of more modest means, the goal was healing so that you could be restored to your appropriate social status.

The poor, however, did not have these options. The disabled or chronically ill would usually have to survive by begging on the streets. Those families who had day laborers lived day by day, and would have nothing left over for medical expenses. They would have to wait it out until the next itinerant healer came through town.

We might be tempted to view this Gospel story about a blind beggar having his sight restored as simply another example of Jesus as the healer. Period.

But, I think it's a lot wider than that. It is a story that invites us to recognize and respond to the work and person of Jesus as he leads the procession, calls others to follow, heals, and grants mercy.

As the story unfolds, Jesus and the disciples are approaching the end of their travels, in Jericho, on the edge of Jerusalem.

The echo of that question Jesus asks, "Who do people say that I am?", visits us again as our attention shifts to a blind beggar.

Of course, Jesus has healed before, but this time it's a bit different. This time the person is actually called out by his Aramaic name, Bartimaeus. It means "son of Timaeus" or "son of honor".

It is a powerful experience at times when you are recognized, perhaps even decades after you've grown up in your hometown area. A couple of years ago I went back for the funeral service of a woman, who with her family lived on the farm just adjacent to ours when I was growing up.

At the visitation, an older man approached me and said, "You're Jack's son, aren't you?" He was referring to my Dad, who passed away in 2010. I didn't remember this gentleman, but he remembered me and related to me that he and my Dad had a history of coffee and conversation. I learned more about my Dad from that encounter!

This blind man, Bartimaeus, is not stopped by the rebukes of any insider group. He persists until his shouts are recognized. He understands that being restored to honor, productivity, and well-being depends on the mercy of the one he reveres as the Son of David.

He refuses to be defined by his personal circumstances. He refuses to be defined by the expectations of Jesus' inner group, who assume the right to speak on his behalf. This one is going to make darn sure that his call will be heard by Jesus.

That persistence pays off and sets in motion a wave of mercy, blessing, and change.

Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus for mercy—and Jesus calls for him. And in that calling, it is as if Jesus assures him—"I see you. I value you. You are a part of us. Join us in this community of love."

Bartimaeus has been taken out of a life of isolation, but comes to life in community. A community of faith, where even today, we may find our mentors and friends, teachers and fellow travelers, who help us to discern how to live this life and what values to uphold. A place where we might be called out by OUR name, no matter who we are or where we are on life's journey.

Bartimaeus had been an outsider, similar to the unnamed woman who touched the hem of Jesus' garment. Neither of them had friends or community to assist them; both are pushed to the very edge of society; both take bold initiatives; and both are commended by Jesus with the same words—“Your faith has made you well.”

Your faith has made you whole.

Bartimaeus comes to Jesus and casts aside his cloak (or mantle in our version). As a cloak, we might regard it as representing his most treasured possession. It has kept him warm through the cold nights. It probably also has held the meager spoils of his begging. In his act of throwing off his cloak, we see the image of one who leaves a former life behind and follows Jesus “on the way.”

Does give us food for thought... Might we be carrying around a cloak or mantle of some kind that we need to abandon? What might that be?

Who, or better WHAT, is keeping us from reaching Jesus?

Maybe, instead of praying with the question of “Who do I want Christ to be for ME just now?”—it should be instead the question of “Who does Christ want me to be for HIM right now?”

There's a line in that hymn that goes... “Won't you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you? Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant, too.”

Naomi Shihab Nye wrote this reflection in *Into the Wild* that reflects on that “let me be as Christ to you” theme:

“Wandering around the Albuquerque Airport terminal, after learning my flight had been delayed four hours, I heard an announcement: “If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately.

Well, one pauses these days. But Gate A-4 was my own gate. I went there.

An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor wailing “Help” said the flight agent. “Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this.” I stooped to put my arm around the woman and spoke.

“Shu-dow-a, Shu-bid-uck Habibti? Stani schway, Min fadlick, Shu-bit-se-wee?” The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying.

She thought the flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day. I said, “No, we’re fine, you’ll get there, just later, who is picking you up? Let’s call them.”

We called her son, I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and ride next to her. She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it. Then we called my Dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out they had shared friends. Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her? This all took up two hours.

She was laughing a lot by then. Telling of her life, patting my knee, answering questions. She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies from her bag—little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts—and was offering them to all the women at the gate.

To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. We were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. And then the airline broke out free apple juice from coolers and two little girls from our flight ran around serving it and they were covered with powdered sugar, too. And I noticed my new best friend—by now we were holding hands—had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

And I looked around that gate filled with late and weary ones and I thought, THIS is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate—once the crying of confusion stopped—seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women, too. This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.”

Who does Christ want me to be for him right now??

