

Pastor Jonna Bohigian
We Are All Beggars
Mark 10:46 – 52

Coming from the earthy Central Valley to the high-tech Silicon Valley felt intimidating. How does ministry look in the Silicon Valley? Are there screens everywhere? Does everyone have the latest gear and five social media accounts? Will the same style of sermons work, or will there need to be fanfare and a lightshow accompanying every illustration? Will it be necessary to have a certain level of charisma, because many are used to regular, motivating speeches from a top executive?

As I've joked with friends, I am about the *oldest* person my age. So, all of those questions I had, were *fears*, as I began ministry at St. Timothy's. To my surprise, these questions and fears were *unfounded*. I came to discover that many of you at St. Tim's are here and committed *not* because this is a mirror image of your life in corporate America, but precisely because it's *not*. Many of you are here because you *don't* want a light show; you *don't* want a gimmick; you *don't* want to be sold something; you *don't* want church to reflect corporate America. You are here because you want something *real*; you want *authentic community*; you want people to *know* who you are; you want to *know* God; and most of all, you want to *follow Jesus* with your whole being. Your faith is the most important part of your life, so you are here, committed to Christ's church through every season and every storm.

At the beginning of the pandemic, there was so much negativity – *everywhere!* We could feel it in *ourselves*; it was *palpable*. There were articles and stories of pastors who knew that they would burn out in short order, because their congregations were *so hard* on them. There was a story of one pastor whose office door was *kicked down*, because his congregant was *so angry* with him.

It has been an *incredible gift*, not to be able to resonate with stories like that! You have been kind, compassionate, and understanding – even though your lives have experienced tremendous disruption. Much of last year, the officers of the council, otherwise known as the Admin Team, met with the pastors *every week* to seek wisdom and support, charting the unknown waters of ministry in the time of COVID. And though not everyone is back and engaged in this community, many *are*, and continue to offer their gifts to be a blessing to our church and local community. Thank you!

We have been through a *lot* together, and it's important to *remember*. And give thanks. It's also important to remember that it's *not just* the pandemic that we've weathered. Coinciding with this huge, trying reality, has been the experience of grieving the loss of long-term leadership at St. Tim's, and adjusting to *new* leadership. It's a true test of the church, when leadership changes and storms (like the pandemic), arise. How will the church respond? Is the flock only present when it feels familiar, when a certain pastor or leader is at the helm, when the conditions are just right? Or does the church leave when it feels less familiar, more shaken?

I am proud and *thankful* for the response of St. Timothy's Lutheran Church during this season! What could have been a perfect storm or a perfect excuse for you to disengage, has predominantly opened the door to more authentic community and the sharing of your gifts. I am so thankful, and praise God!

Though we are not out of the woods yet, we *will* get there. We *will* get to a place of greater safety and familiarity. We're on this journey, following Jesus, together. And this pandemic has revealed how true that is! We are on this journey *together*.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus was on a journey with his disciples to Jerusalem. And as they got closer, it increasingly felt like a *movement* – join the crowd or get out of the way! They could *learn* from this rabbi, challenge him, and *follow* him. Perhaps he would succeed in establishing his kingdom. Who wouldn't want to be a part of *that*? And that's precisely what his disciples asked for in verse 37: "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." Though Jesus had *three times* told his disciples that he would suffer and die, his disciples *still* thought that when Jesus established his kingdom, it would be powerful, glorious. Jesus would be king, and they wanted to sit on his right and left *in power*.

Jesus' disciples didn't get it. *Every time* Jesus told them that he would suffer and die, they didn't understand. The first time, Peter rebuked Jesus. The second time, the disciples argued over who was the greatest. The third time, James and John asked to be on Jesus' right and left in glory.

When Jesus describes his death the third time, his disciples *still* don't get it, and then we're swept away in the bustle of the crowd. We find ourselves in Jericho, 15 miles from Jerusalem. There is a road which leads from Jericho to Jerusalem, and we are on it, on our way to Jerusalem. In the midst of the mounting momentum of the crowd, a man becomes the center of the scene. Most translations read like the NIV in verse 46: "As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (which means 'son of Timaeus'), was sitting by the roadside begging." What's interesting is that that's a pretty different sentence structure than if we were to more literally translate the Greek. In the Greek, the order would be: The son of Timaeus, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, sat along the way. What difference do you notice between these two sentences? In the Greek, his *name* comes before his *disability*. Mark wants the reader to recognize the *person* first, *before* we see any disability. He is the son of "Timaeus," which means "honor." A son of *honor* has entered the story, and we later discover that he is also blind, and therefore *not treated* with honor in society.

This is a story of *honor* and *shame*. Jesus' disciples asked for positions of honor in Jesus' kingdom, but had no idea what they were asking for. And then Jesus passes by this man, whose name means "son of honor," but who is treated with *dishonor*.

Perhaps those who first heard this story were *surprised*. They thought that Mark might interrupt the story to talk about a rich person, or another man that society might deem important. They heard that a son of honor had come into Jesus' midst, only to discover that he was blind, and a beggar.

But those who walked by Bartimaeus that day knew *immediately* that he wasn't an honorable man. They knew that he sat there, every day, with his cloak beneath him, begging for money. He was blind, and they believed, *responsible* for his blindness – that, or his parents were. They had likely tossed money his way, *frequently*. And now he was in the way. He couldn't follow the movement. He couldn't walk with them to Jerusalem, so it was best to shut him up.

But he cries out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Or, as the Greek has it, "Son of David, Jesus, have mercy on me!" (Mk 10:47b). Bartimaeus refers to Jesus' title *first*,

bestowing honor on him. Jesus is the descendant of King David; he is the “coming Messiah, the one to establish the coming kingdom,”¹ and he *needs* to take notice.

The crowd tries to shush him, but he *cries* out all the more. “Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Mk 10:48b). He doesn’t want to hear the clink of one more coin; he wants *healing* and *honor*. And then he hears the crowd, summoning him to Jesus, so he *jumps* up, *abandons* his cloak, and *comes* to Jesus! The man no longer needs his cloak to collect *one more* coin. He *throws* it aside, because *Jesus* is calling him! His life will be changed!

And Jesus, though he knows the man is blind, doesn’t just heal him. He asks Bartimaeus what he would like him to do for him. When he asked that question to his disciples, they said that they wanted to sit on his right and left. But *this* time he asks the question, Bartimaeus says, “Rabbi, I want to see” (Mk 10:51b).

Though Bartimaeus is *blind*, he is the one person who actually *gets* it. He is the only one who truly *sees* Jesus. He knows that Jesus is the Son of David, the Messiah, the one worth throwing caution to the wind and abandoning *everything* for. *Bartimaeus* is the model disciple.

Jesus bestows *honor* on him by commending his faith and restoring his sight. “Go,” [says] Jesus, ‘your faith has healed you’” (Mk 10:52a).

Bartimaeus *doesn’t* go, but *abandons* the life he has known to follow Jesus. He will follow Jesus, even on the way to the cross.

Many of you know Nathaniel. He officially became a member of St. Timothy’s a few months ago, but our staff has joked that Nathaniel was the most involved non-member we’d ever seen! Nathaniel’s been involved in our FISH Food Pantry, youth Cornerstone, Prayer Group, Grow Group, and I am sure I’m missing more! Nathaniel is so refreshingly honest and kind. And it’s always a privilege to hear him share his thoughts on life and faith.

At Prayer Group a couple of weeks ago, he shared his reflections on Numbers 11. This is the passage where Moses pleads with God to kill him, because the people are *so unbearable*. In response to Moses, the LORD tells him to gather seventy of Israel’s elders, and God would “take some of the power of the Spirit that [was] on [him] and put it on them. They [would] share the burden of the people with [Moses] so that [he would] not have to carry it alone” (Num 11:16 – 17).

Nathaniel stopped and said, “Notice what God did. God took some of the power *from Moses* and placed it on seventy others. Moses already had that power in him, but he didn’t *recognize* it. He had this incredible power of the Holy Spirit, but he couldn’t appreciate it until God shared it with seventy others. How often do *I* not see what the Spirit is doing, and how much God has given me? How often am *I* unaware of Jesus’ presence?”

Nathaniel’s reflection is such a gift, because we can *all* relate. How are *you and I* blind to the movement of the Spirit, blind to the gifts God has given us, blind to Jesus’ presence among us?

When we’re honest with ourselves, we admit that we are *often* blind, and are much more like the *crowd* than Bartimaeus. We want to follow the spectacle, to learn from and challenge the master, to be powerful. We want to be esteemed and influential. When a detractor gets in the way, we want to shush them. Because healing a blind beggar can’t *possibly* be the most important thing to Jesus at this moment.

¹ Tim Geddert, *Mark*, 253.

But that's just the thing. Jesus' purpose is *not* to get swept up in a movement, to honor the powerful, to place anyone on a pedestal. His purpose *is* to bring honor to the beggar, to the one who has been shamed; to heal; to save; to bring the joy of his presence in the most *lowly* of places; to bring the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

We are on this journey together. And we join Jesus like Bartimaeus with confidence, *not* because we are worthy, but because we know that we are beggars, in need of Jesus. This is most certainly true!