

Have a Little Faith

David Schilling, 10/29/24

Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

What if the crowd had won? What if Bartimaeus had been silenced, and Jesus had not heard his humble cry for mercy?

The story of Bartimaeus is without a doubt, a culmination of faith within Mark's Gospel. Jesus, on his journey to Jerusalem, has been asked by plenty of people to do plenty of miracles. The Pharisees ask him for a sign to prove who he is, and he tells them to get lost, saying "*Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation*". A rich man asks what he can do to inherit eternal life, and Jesus recounts the ten commandments to him. When the man answers that he's followed him all his life, Jesus implores him to sell all of his many possessions, and come follow him. The rich man's response is to walk away in grief. Miracles don't come cheap.

James and John ask for a seat at his right and left hand, acknowledging his glory, and then promptly attempting to cash in on it. Jesus asks "*Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?*" They reply that yes, indeed, they are completely missing the point that he's referring to suffering, sacrifice and ultimately death. He tells them that they might well be subject to that, but to sit with him in his rule as King is chosen only by God...and by the way, it's not them, and while they're at it, along with the rest of the disciples, they might want consider a life of service instead of trying to ask again.

Many of the other miracles that Jesus does perform are clouded by an air of secrecy or frustration. He restores sight, hearing and speech to others, only in private, and instructs witnesses to tell nobody, or for the healed not to return to public view. Peter acknowledges him as the Messiah, and Jesus tells him to not tell anyone. A father brings him a boy with a spirit making him unable to speak, explaining that he asked the disciples to cure him first, but they were unable. Jesus heals the boy, but not before exclaiming "*You faithless generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much*

longer must I put up with you?. expressing his frustration with...perhaps everyone around... the disciples for their inability to heal, the father for his lack of faith, the surrounding crowd and scribes for doubting his power and authority.

The story that Richard just read for us is different, though. It's a simple and humble ask, and a simple yet powerful response, both rooted in pure faith. Bartimaeus first acknowledges Jesus as Son of David, and follows it up with "have mercy on me". To put it a little differently, Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus "I see you for who you truly are, I believe in your power, now, will you give me what I may not deserve".

Bartimaeus does not attempt to prove his worthiness to be healed to Jesus, nor does he request Jesus prove his power. As a result, Bartimaeus becomes the first person in Mark's Gospel to not only be healed by Jesus, but to end up following him.

Now that we've discussed the power of this interaction, let's look at how it barely even happened, and how like many people of faith, Bartimaeus had to overcome a crowd intent on silencing him. A crowd that had already judged his worth, failing to realize that it didn't even matter. I would argue that we have all not only fought against a crowd like that, we've also been part of that crowd.

This story reminds me of a hot afternoon in July, one of those afternoons where the blazing sun intensifies the humidity between storms, and we walk around feeling like we're living in a pressure cooker. I had just emerged from the air conditioning of the Buffalo Mountain Coop in Hardwick, and facing the heat head on, was delighted to hear festive music filling the air. It reminded me of so many cities I had walked through in Argentina and Peru, in which music played from seemingly every house, every car, and every person...an exuberant praise of simply existing, and a faith in the goodness of the day, despite challenges lurking everywhere. As I crossed the parking lot, an older customer, looking around with some confusion, called out to a well-dressed shopper in a shiny new Volvo, adorned with stickers proclaiming a progressive political mindset. Hey, I think you left your radio on.

The owner of the Volvo looked back at their car in confusion, looked up, and then replied "Nope...not me...not sure who...Oh! It's that dumbass across the street blasting his music again. I'm sorry, I'm just so sick of him thinking we all care". Now,

the man across the street is certainly eccentric, and certainly makes his presence known. His porch is adorned with a combination of plants, American flags, feathers, scarecrows, Marine Corps stickers, and branches, with an old-timey looking radio that he does like to listen to...loudly. Aside from a cardboard sign imploring us all to slow down, creatively spelled, there's absolutely nothing negative to be found. No political signs, no foul language. Hardly someone who needs to be publicly silenced, especially by someone with a COEXIST sticker on the back of their car.

A few short days later, I was eating dinner in Montpelier, and was half listening to some loud conversation a few tables over. Rural Vermont was the topic, and two friends were discussing just how much the Northeast Kingdom felt like a different world to them. What caught my ear was one of the men, ostensibly a traveling representative for something declaring "sure, they might have some rednecks there, but it's nothing like Lyndonville. Nothing good comes from there...I mean, you're talking about people with Mountain Dew flavored chew tucked under their two teeth". As someone who spends more time in Lyndonville than I do at home, commuting an hour each way because I believe in the type of education we provide to our students, I was more than taken aback, not to mention, I've seen no evidence of Mountain Dew flavored chewing tobacco.

I texted the conversation to my friend Erik, our school's external relations director. Erik is someone who left a well-paying job in Burlington for the challenge and promise of building up a small school in the Northeast Kingdom with great potential. Just in case you thought trash talking and attempting to silence each other's light was just a problem of privilege, I'll assure you that it goes both ways. For his efforts to bring much needed funds, jobs and programs into our region, Erik has been dismissed as Mr. Chittenden County in various pockets of Lyndonville influence.

Erik's immediate response was "We are our own worst enemy in this state. When is Vermont going to stop tearing each other apart? When are we going to have a little faith in each other?"

When will we, indeed. Last week, Heidi Tringe gave us a powerful lesson in loving our neighbor, even when it's hard. She referenced a talk by Rumble Strip's Erika Heilman, called Building Community in our Divided Society. In that talk, Heilman states "To

love a place, you have to know the dark parts, the peculiar parts, even the ugly parts” and goes on to describe a very different parking lot encounter than I witnessed.

She describes winter in the parking lot of St. Johnsbury’s White’s Market, and encountering a group of women in their early 20’s, smoking cigarettes in pajama bottoms and boots, who seemed to be always there. Heilman’s response was *“every time I see them, I felt warm...like I know where I am, and I loved them, and they anchored me in the winter when I went grocery shopping.”*

Heilman reminds us that we don’t have to like everyone to love them. She describes it as love having a radical openness that’s even somehow more accessible than like. Liking doesn’t matter so much, it’s about curiosity.

This has been a particularly rough month for me in the department of love’s radical openness. Due to a tremendous amount of medical leave within the UCC conference, my application materials for my member in discernment and lay minister status for this church accidentally went unread for 6 weeks. Of course, I took that to the darkest places...wondering again and again if perhaps my application was so bad they wouldn’t even consider it. For me, this process is one huge ask for mercy...being granted something I do not feel I deserve, mainly due to lack of educational preparation. Because it’s such a life changing process, the stakes feel astronomical, and in the throes of self-doubt, its hard to see love and mercy for what it is. God’s reminder to me that it still exists came in the most unexpected of places. After church, Marilla and I went to the Village Diner in Hardwick. Marilla, the ever vigilant lifelong vegetarian made sure to ask for a dish to be made without the bacon, accidentally overlooking that the preceding word was sausage. The place was packed, the kitchen overworked, and this beautiful custom breakfast skillet came out, full of ingredients, including extra sausage to make up for the lack of bacon. We felt awful and apologized profusely, and within 5 minutes had a replacement dish. The owner’s response was not “you sure did make a mistake”, was not “of course we’ll have to charge you for both”, or was not even “let’s split the difference”. Her response was “you’re human, aren’t you? If we messed up, wouldn’t you be kind to us? I have faith that you would, so here you go. Enjoy”. In that simple act of a re-made breakfast that we did not deserve, I felt so much needed love, and the presence of God bringing me out of the shadows.

Let's look back at last week's Gospel reading to better understand this one. Jesus answered, *you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.* The second is this, *'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'* *There is no other commandment greater than these.*

Loving our neighbor is an act of discipleship. It's practicing Heilman's simple act of radical openness, recognizing that when we build each other up, we help empower countless examples of Bartimaeus right here in our brave little state, who need love, who are calling out "I have faith, have mercy on me", and who are silenced by shortsighted intolerance.

May we become conduits to faith, not barriers from proclaiming it, and may we work toward love in all that we do,
so that we all can be heard,
and none of us become a barrier to those who need God's mercy,
offering very little,

with everything to gain.