

“Claiming our Need”

Mark 10:46-52

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This past week I attended a couple of events that focused on concerns about water, locally and globally. These events reminded me of a story about an African Village told to me by a friend.

Though I may get some of the details wrong I think I can get the important points right.

In a particular small village in Africa the community had access to a common water source. They would go and get water for home use, for gardens, for schools. At one particular time food was scarce in the village and one of the teachers in the local school decided that she and her class would plant a garden to grow some food.

It just so happened that at that time the government was selling water rights to an international water developer who said they would make clean water available to everyone, but the company would control all waters flowing to local communities.

In the village where the teacher and kids were planting to grow food, the water had always been free and available. When the international corporation came in, the water was shut off and anyone who wanted water had to pay for it. The village was very poor and the teacher and children didn't have the money necessary to water the plants that would produce food that would reduce their hunger.

So the teacher went to the government authority in charge of water and she told him her story. His response was that the water situation was very complicated and she couldn't possibly understand. The teacher paused and said: “I may not know all about governments and corporations, but I do know one thing, we need water.”

The teacher stayed and argued her case. She told them that her village used to have plenty of water that was available to everyone without cost. She argued that the government was to help the people not harm them. And when she was done the government authority helped the woman's village get the water they needed.

The teacher claimed her need. She didn't quickly abandon the pursuit of assistance just because there were obstacles, she kept her clarity and didn't shy away from her cause.

Our gospel passage is a story of a man claiming his need. It is the familiar story of the man Bartimaeus who was blind.

Bartimaeus was sitting by the side of the road begging. It was probably a familiar spot for him and he was probably familiar to the people who lived in the area.

On the day of our story Jesus is passing by and Bartimaeus knows about Jesus, so he shouts out, “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me.” The crowd tries to shut him up, just like they tried to keep kids from

bothering Jesus, or Zaccheus from being seen by Jesus, or the woman with the flow of blood from touching Jesus. But just like all these other cases Jesus tells the disciples to let Bartimaeus come forward. Bartimaeus does, and Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus made few assumptions and he also wanted people to be clear about their need.

Bartimaeus said: "I want to see." So Jesus tells him his sight is restored and that he should follow him on the way.

If we didn't know how the story would end we should have because we have heard other stories about Jesus, and he was very consistent in situations like this one.

One commentator I read said that Bartimaeus stands in sharp contrast to the disciples who ask for positions of status and power when Jesus said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" But I disagree the disciples are not in contrast, they simply reveal the breadth of our human desires and Jesus took their request as seriously as he took that of Bartimaeus. Jesus, who reveals God's ways, responds to human needs with life giving actions. This is what is essential to hear in all these stories, needs are heard and responded to in life giving ways.

Odd as it may sound, this story of Bartimaeus asking for what he needs is as important for people who have much to hear, as it is for people who have very little. It is important for the wealthy and the comfortable, the strong and the responsible, adults and caretakers. It is important for all these to hear because the story of Jesus and Bartimaeus is a story about what it is to be human, which among people of the Christian faith means being vulnerable, confused, needy as well as being resourceful, resilient and hopeful.

The story of Bartimaeus is a quintessential story about being human in this world. It is a story about our deepest fear that we will not be able to take care of ourselves, that we will not survive if others don't help us and it is a story about our deepest hope that in our most vulnerable time there will always be someone to listen and address our need.

Learning how to express our needs is on the one hand a very natural process, but on the other hand it is something that requires practice and nurturing.

Consider infants; newborns from their first days in the world begin to learn about expressing their needs. They are dependent on others for all their needs and they have limited ways of expressing what they need. It is essential that they have people around them who are attentive and listening. Some of us are more discriminating than others. I remember when our kids were newborns and how I would have to go through a series of possible needs when they would cry – are they hungry, tired, needing to be changed, etc. I also remember Wendy being able to distinguish cries – that's her tired cry, or that's his hungry cry, to me baby cries were pretty much all the same and my job was a lot of guessing.

At the very earliest time in life we learn about whether people and the world are going to respond to our needs. As infants we learn whether or not someone is paying attention. If infants don't know that they will be taken care of, or that someone is there to hold them, studies show they begin to shut down, withdraw, stop expressing their needs. At this early age we can begin disregarding our hungers, hurts, tiredness and desire to be touched.

For those of us who grow up hearing that we are to be self-reliant in all matters, or that we are to be the provider, giver, dependable rock, the one who is capable of handling all things, we can become like the infant who stops listening to our own needs. At times we can start saying to ourselves that the people around us have too much to handle themselves and we don't want to be a burden on them. Like a plant that never gets fed or watered and begins to shrivel up, when we start to think of our needs as unwanted burdens we can begin to shrivel up with sadness, anger, or cynicism.

Over the past few months I was struck by the contrast between two family members who have polar opposite responses to some desperate needs in their lives.

One of my family members has decided to get a divorce after more than 45 years of marriage. This particular person has always been strong for members of his family. He was always dependable for his wife, his kids and his grand kids. In hard financial times he worked hours upon hours to bring in enough income, but he never asked his wife to help shoulder some of the load. When his kids were having difficulties of all different kinds he listened, he solved problems, he took them to doctors and helped bring them through. But he was never able to ask for help when he needed it and no one thought to ask.

After 45 years of marriage he finally realized how lonely he was and how angry he was that his wife and adult kids seemed to care so little about him, so he set out to claim what he needs and is proving to be harder than he might have thought to change his own behaviors.

Another family member has somehow learned over the years to be much better about sharing what she needs while drawing on her own strength.

This family member has been diagnosed with cancer and is currently undergoing treatments. She has been able to let others support her in a variety of ways not by demanding help, but by making her struggles visible. At work she wore a striking head scarf after she lost her hair. The next day everyone at work was wearing a scarf or hat to show their support. Her son set up one those Caring Bridge websites to update the family on how she was doing and to allow others to offer their words of encouragement. In these ways and other she has claimed her needs and is letting others respond who can. Instead of anger, sadness and loneliness she expresses hope, laughter and peace in the midst of struggle.

Our biblical story of Jesus and Bartimaeus is meant to portray something of what God's kingdom is like.

The kingdom is a place where we can claim our needs knowing that there is a presence that hears what is in our hearts and on our lips. The kingdom is a place where being human and vulnerable is not a burden but an expectation and a sharing of life's fullness. The kingdom is where we hear the words, "what would you like me to do for you?" and we feel welcome to respond with honesty.