

Not so long ago, in a land not too far away, there lived a little boy. The little boy looked like any other little boy, but he was different. He was sick. This little boy loved to run, ride his bike, play with his friends. He did these things all the time, as his sickness was invisible.

But when he was in middle school, he discovered that not only was he sick, he was **really** sick, which made it easy for him to get sick with other things, too. He missed a lot of school. He had to stay inside, stay in bed, watch his friends play outside without him.

Eventually, (surprisingly!), despite his doctor's dire warnings that he likely would not survive, he began to feel better.

'Mom? Can I go back to school?'

My heart goes out to this little boy. Just like it goes out to Bartimaeus. They didn't do anything wrong ... they didn't do anything to cause their illness or blindness. It just happened that way.

Back in Jesus' day, there was still a lingering understanding that bad things only happened to people who deserved it. If good fortune came your way, then that must mean you are blessed by God. But if hardship was your lot, well, you reap what you sow. Thank goodness we know better.

The little boy's mom said she'd call the school to figure out how to get him back in class. The school said no, he can't come back ~ he's too sick, and he was a danger to the other children.

Problem was the boy's sickness was not well understood. Some thought that the boy's illness could be spread by using the same utensils, using the same bathroom, being in gym class together.¹ But that wasn't the

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ryan_White

case. So his mom began an eight-month administrative appeal process to let her child go to school.

“Mom, I want to go to school.”

This morning we meet Bartimaeus: a poor man, a blind man, a man who was reduced to begging for his subsistence from passersby. He cries out for mercy, and many people in the crowd order him to be quiet.

Jesus hears him. Jesus understands. Bartimaeus has great faith. The people, however, are more concerned with decorum than with the needs of those less privileged. They are bothered by Bartimaeus’ behavior – making a ruckus by calling out when the great spiritual leader passes through town. After all, he is a dirty, uncouth, disruptive nuisance and sinner who embarrasses the good people of Jericho.

What does Jesus do? Jesus raises this man up onto his own two feet, he takes him from a position of subservience and raises him up as human being, and asks him genuinely, lovingly, compassionately: What do you want?

This is one of the most important moments in the entirety of the gospels for telling us about who Jesus is. Jesus does not assume that Bartimaeus wants to be made able to see. He does not assume that Bartimaeus sees his blindness as a disability. Jesus does not impose his will on Bartimaeus, or make any assumptions about what he needs or wants. He simply and straightforwardly asks, “What do you want me to do for you?”

And Bartimaeus says to Jesus, “My teacher, let me see again.” The depths of longing in that request are almost too much to bear. ‘My teacher, let me see again, and let me no longer have to beg by the side of the road. Let me see again so that I may contribute to my community. Let me see again, and let me no longer be looked at with pity and scorn and fear by passersby. My teacher, let me see again, and let me go free.’

“Mom, I want to go to school.” A simple request from a sweet young kid. The year was 1985, and his name was Ryan White. Ryan was born with a hemophilia, a disorder that prevented him from being able to stop bleeding when he got hurt. The treatment was a regular regimen of blood transfusions ... leading to his contracting HIV (a virus that was not well understood yet) and developing AIDS.

In February the following year, he was permitted one day of school. Of the 360 students who attended his middle school, 151 students stayed home that day. Threats of violence and lawsuits to prevent him from a full return to school persisted.

His mother stated, “It was really bad. People were really cruel, people said that he had to be gay, that he had to have done something bad or wrong, or he wouldn’t have had it. It was God’s punishment, we heard the God’s punishment a lot. That somehow, some way he had done something he shouldn’t have done or he wouldn’t have gotten AIDS.”²

The story of Bartimaeus is often held up as one of the great healing miracles of Jesus. In the Gospels, Jesus transforms the lives of those on the margins and draws them more and more into the center.

But what strikes me about this story that I had not before considered is this: what if we saw this story as the crowd and the followers of Jesus being blind and not Bartimaeus?

Perhaps the most remarkable turn in this story is that Bartimaeus is not the only one *healed* and *called* in this story. Did you catch who else had a radical conversion? The crowd. They begin with cruelty and exclusion in their hearts, doing everything they can to keep Bartimaeus away from Jesus: Mark writes, “Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’” And this is the pivotal moment. Jesus does not call Bartimaeus directly. *He calls the crowd to call Bartimaeus.* “Jesus stood still and said, ‘Call him here.’”

² <https://hab.hrsa.gov/about-ryan-white-hiv-aids-program/who-was-ryan-white>

And then the redemption, so easy to skip over if you're not paying close attention. "And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.'" *This is the moment of the crowd's conversion, the crowd's healing, and the crowd's call.* Jesus' love is so sneaky and so powerful that it broke open their hardened hearts and they probably didn't even notice it. They go from trying to keep Bartimaeus away from Jesus to urging him forward. They go from seeing Bartimaeus as an embarrassment and trying to shut him up and keep him hidden, to telling him to take heart and go forward into Jesus' embrace.

When a bullet was fired through the White's living room window, the family decided to leave their hometown and move half an hour away. "On August 31, 1986, a 'very nervous' [14 year old] was greeted by the school principal, the school system superintendent, and a handful of students who had been educated about AIDS and were unafraid to shake Ryan's hand."³

Notice in the gospel the crowd's change of heart is the first miracle of healing. The crowd is given their sight and actually sees Bartimaeus.

Once their blindness is cured the crowd didn't pray for Bartimaeus, they didn't form a committee, or call a meeting or even have a theological discussion on the merits of Bartimaeus. The crowd saw him and showed him to Jesus and let Jesus do the rest.

The same is true for us. When we are converted to be followers of Jesus, we are healed of our blindness so that we can see clearly so that we can invite others to share in Christ's healing.

Another important point is that call is never individual. We hear call in community. Bartimaeus cries out for Jesus, Jesus calls the crowd, the crowd calls Bartimaeus, then Jesus calls Bartimaeus to follow him on the way. Ryan cried out, his mother cried out, one community rejected him. Ryan cried out again, his mother cried out again, and another

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ryan_White

community responded by listening, learning, and welcoming Ryan into their fold.

The process of call and response is deeply healing to everyone who chooses to be involved.

What do you want me to do for you? Ryan White said, I want to go to school.

What do you want me to do for you? Rosa Parks said, I want to sit down.

What do you want me to do for you? Gene Robinson said, I want to serve God and my church.

What do you want me to do for you? Chelsea Manning said, I want to serve my country.

What do you want me to do for you? George Floyd said I want to breathe.

What do you want me to do for you? Ahmaud Arbery said, I want to go for a run.

What do you want me to do for you? Breonna Taylor said, I want to feel safe in my own home.

Where do we start? We turn out hearts to Jesus, we listen, and we cry out to Jesus, just as Bartimaeus did: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus is always responding and always healing and always inviting. And when we allow our hearts to finally turn, we hear Jesus’ invitation, we recognize our call. When we deeply listen to those who are less privileged, those pushed from the center and who live in the margins ... when we deeply listen to them, we are healed as they respond to *our* question, “What do you want me to do for you?”