

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
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What Do You Want?

Mark 10:46-52 NRSV They came to Jericho. As [Jesus] and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. 47 When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*" 48 Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "*Son of David, have mercy on me!*" 49 Jesus stood still and said, "*Call him here.*" And they called the blind man, saying to him, "*Take heart; get up, he is calling you.*" 50 So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. 51 Then Jesus said to him, "*What do you want me to do for you?*" The blind man said to him, "*My teacher, let me see again.*" 52 Jesus said to him, "*Go; your faith has made you well.*" Immediately he regained his sight and followed [Jesus] on the way.

When Barbara and I lived in Hawaii, we had occasion to change planes at the Honolulu airport at least once a month or so when going to or coming from the Big Island. One of the things that we could almost always count on was seeing several sets of young parents at what is clearly the **end** of their vacations in Hawaii. How do I know that it was the *end* of those vacations? Well, they were usually sunburned and smelled like aloe vera; they looked tired; and they didn't have leis around their necks. Those folks just getting **to** Hawaii may have looked tired from their long plane rides, but theirs was an excited-looking tired and they were often bedecked with leis around their necks. But those folks headed home, particularly the ones towing around a couple of small children with them – so many of them just looked worn out. I also was always startled at the amount of equipment that seems to be required these days to transport little ones – these parents were often pushing strollers the size of Humvees, festooned with all kinds of pockets and compartments and levers and knobs and places for toddler supplies and equipment. It was one such couple, that I remember most clearly, for they were pushing **two** of these huge strollers and in one of them was a squalling, screaming toddler who was clearly at the end of his rope and who clearly had lost his aloha spirit somewhere between checking out of the hotel and the rental car return and

the ag machine and the check-in and the security line. And the father was being patient with the toddler, but you could tell he was straining and about to snap. And finally, I he did, saying to the toddler exasperatedly: *“What do you want me to do for you!?!?”*
“What do you want?!?!?”

Now this question on that young father’s lips is quite understandable, isn’t it? Sometimes – and not just with over-tired toddlers, either – you just don’t know what is expected, what is needed, what is wanted, what will help, do you? I sympathize with that young father. But his question, understandable as it was in that situation, seems to me not nearly so understandable, at first blush anyway, when it comes from the lips of **Jesus** in our story for today. In fact, it seems downright strange to find Jesus asking this question. For imagine in your mind’s eye the situation as described in our scripture for the morning: Jesus and the disciples were leaving the walled city of Jericho by the main gate. Now, in Jesus’ day, that is where all the beggars, all the homeless folks, all those down on their luck and looking for a handout, gathered – right at the gates of the city. This was commonplace in any of the larger cities in Judea and so the sight that Mark is describing wouldn’t have been at all unusual to Jesus – Jesus had lived and moved around the country for thirty years and he knew about beggars at the gates and knew that these were the people who depended on the kindness – or at least the guilt feelings – of strangers in order to survive.

And so there they are, leaving the city, and one of the beggars – Bartimaeus – manages to make himself heard more clearly than the others – maybe he had a particularly loud voice; maybe there was a lull that he fitted his cry into. And so he shouts, *“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”* And probably much to Bartimaeus’ surprise, Jesus stops – and calls Bartimaeus to come to him. (Did you catch that little reference in the story when the other beggars said *“Get up there – he’s calling you!”*)

And so probably with a catch in his throat, Bartimaeus haltingly makes his way to Jesus. Now here is the strange part: Jesus – the one who has been going around the countryside healing the sick and even causing the blind to see, the one who has taught with power and insight, the one who seemed to be able to plumb people’s souls to their depth – now asks Bartimaeus the very same question that that harried father had asked his toddler son: *“What do you want me to do for you?”* Now from one perspective, it seems almost cruel, it could sound almost like a kind of taunting, *“What do you want me to do for you?”* Isn’t the answer obvious?

Well, my friends, no; it’s not obvious, is it? Sometimes, in fact, despite what we may say we really don’t in fact want anyone – God or anybody else, for that matter – to do anything at all! When one of our daughters was a junior in high school, I used to drive her to school most mornings. And some mornings she was upset or angry or worried about this or that and so she would be talking a blue streak, expressing her anger or worry or frustration. And I, as most males tend to do, usually immediately went into “problem-solving” mode. Was she upset about this or that teacher’s doing this or that thing in this or that class? Well, then, my first response was to think about possible actions in response to the situation, what she could do to make matters better, how she could approach the teacher, strategies or tactics that might work to make the situation better. But sometimes, to my surprise, my offering these problem-solving ideas just seemed to make matters worse, and she would seem to get more and more bothered, and even would get angry at me! I didn’t understand this – she had expressed a frustration and I had tried to think with her about how to fix the situation. But Barbara, who is often a lot wiser than I am sometimes, finally said to me *“You know, sometimes she doesn’t want to ‘fix’ things, she just wants to vent.”* This was an “aha” moment for me. And from then on, at least when I remembered it, when our

daughter would begin our morning drive by expressing some frustration or anger about something, I would simply ask her: *“What do you want from me: What do you want me to do for you? Do you want to problem-solve or do you just need to vent?”*

“What do you want me to do for you?” That’s the question that Jesus asked Bartimaeus, and that is the question that Jesus asks us. Sometimes, indeed, our answer may be: *Lord, I just need to vent. I just need to get it off of my chest. I just need to say out loud my hurt, my anger, my fears, my frustrations to someone who understands, who will offer me a safe place, who will not judge me or take me to task.* Sometimes your or my world is simply not a very good place to be, and we need to be able to express our anger and indignation – or maybe our sadness – to God. And lest you think that that somehow shows a lack of faith, I would remind you of so many of the Psalms where the Psalmist begins this or that psalm expressing his anger or pain or frustration. It was the Psalmist who could begin some of his psalms like this: “O Lord, how many are my enemies” or “How long will I be put to shame?” or even “How long will I have to bear this pain and why do you not do anything about it?”¹

So sometimes what we want and need God to do for us is to be there, to be, in philosopher Alfred Whitehead’s phrase, *“the fellow sufferer who understands.”* And what the gospel of Jesus Christ assures us is that indeed, indeed at [t]he very heart of the gospel is that the life and death of Jesus reveal[s] the unconditional, gracious love of God.² “What do you want me to do for you?” *“I want you to be there God, I want you to hear me, I want you to love me when I’m unlovely, I want you to understand.”* And, my friends, God does, God does.

¹Cf., e.g., Psalms 3, 4, 10, and 13.

²C. Robert Mesle, “A Friend’s Love: Why Process Theology Matters,” <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=90> Originally published in *The Christian Century*, July 15-22, 1987, pp. 622-625.

Now, of course, sometimes we do indeed want and need and are ready for more than this from God. When Jesus comes and says “*What do you want me to do for you?*” sometimes we really are looking not **just** for understanding and an ear or to “vent,” but we are ready for transformation, ready for something new, ready to be changed. But that’s hard, isn’t it? Consider again Bartimaeus. I can imagine that all sorts of answers may have run through his mind. He might have considered saying, “*Well, Lord, I’d really like a much louder voice so I can be a more effective beggar.*” Or he could have said, “*Jesus, what you could do for me is work some of your magic so that I would always be at the front of the crowd here at the gate so I have the best shot at getting the most money.*” And if he had said those sort of things in response to Jesus’ question, I would understand, wouldn’t you? Because real change, real transformation, a real change of direction takes courage. It can be scary.

But sometimes life, your life or mine, is such that we are indeed ready for God through Christ to do a new thing. Maybe there is a pattern in your life that you have gotten used to, gotten comfortable with, but which is finally causing you more pain and frustration than comfort and you are indeed ready to make a change, scary as it can be. Maybe you’re one of those folks who are increasingly feeling the truth of Benjamin Franklin’s statement, a statement that Alcoholics Anonymous has made into one of the foundations of its work, that “*The definition of madness is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.*”³ Maybe you indeed have been doing the same thing over and over again in a relationship, or in an approach to a problem, or in an attitude towards something in your life, and maybe you have come to the realization that that way indeed will never get you a different kind of result – and you need to change.

And that’s when Jesus comes to Bartimaeus and says, “*I’m going to change you*”

³<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/b/benjaminfr109067.html>

and you are going to see. I'm going to change you and that will mean that you no longer have to be a beggar, but it will also mean that all the old ways you knew about getting by are no longer going to work and there may well be times that you are uncomfortable in your new life; there may even be times that you are tempted, Bartimaeus, to want to go back to pretending to be a blind beggar because that will seem easier and more comfortable!" Again, many folks who have been part of AA or any twelve-step program know from experience that one of the riskiest points in recovery is not long after one has stopped drinking or over-eating or doing drugs or whatever, because it turns out that oftentimes it is precisely one's friends and family who have gotten so used to the old ways and old patterns that they sometimes resist the changed behavior and unwittingly push the person to go back to the old, more "comfortable" state of affairs where at least everything was familiar!

And what about in your life? What would you truly like to change? What "blindness" do you have that you would like to have changed into a new way of seeing and acting? What new way of being do you earnestly wish for so that your life might be more beautiful, might better fulfill the purpose that God has for you? That's the question that Jesus puts to you and to me: *"What do you want me to do for you?"* And the good news, the very, very good news this day is that indeed God through Christ is offering you a new way of seeing and will walk with you in the joys and the struggles that come with that new way, and will never leave you. The good news is that you can be changed where you need changing. The good news is that, as with Bartimaeus, your faith that God through Christ will indeed, can indeed, do these things for you will make you well. Always and forever. For that good news of a God who offers us the possibility and the power to change, to be healed, thanks be to God! Amen.