

- With your worship bulletin, I have given you a copy of James Tissot's evocative painting of our Gospel scene in Mark. It portrays *Matthew's* telling of the *same* story, which mentions *two* blind men calling out to Jesus (rather than just one). Mark chooses *instead* to focus on that one man, whom he names as *Bartimaeus*. But the scene largely remains the same in both Gospels. *Jesus and his followers are in Jericho, on their way up to Jerusalem. They are approaching his triumphal entry into the Holy City on what we now call Palm Sunday.*
- In this painting, I like to think of the man on the right as being Bartimaeus, who –*as Mark suggests*– lost his sight at an earlier point in his life.<sup>1</sup> Tissot depicts the other man's eyes as covered, in the way that some sight-impaired people wear sunglasses. Perhaps that other man had been blind from birth. If so, he provides a contrast to Bartimaeus. Noticing this may help us appreciate *the symbolic dimension of blindness and sight at the center of Mark's Gospel*. And it will help us attend to his deeper meaning. For Bartimaeus had sight earlier in life and then lost it. Now, when encountering Jesus, *his ability to see is restored*.
- Let's recall how *last Sunday, in the immediately prior story in Mark*, we heard James and John *act proudly* when approaching Jesus.<sup>2</sup> *Do you remember the question Jesus asked them? He asked James and John, "What do you want me to do for you?"* It's *no coincidence* then, that in today's follow-on story, Mark records *what Jesus asks blind Bartimaeus. It's the same question: "what do you want me to do for you?"* As Mark presents the two *successive and paired* stories, I wonder if we perceive *the parallel* between them. *First*, we hear James and John *blindly* ask Jesus to share in his glory. When answering *the two spiritually-unseeing disciples, Jesus provides a forceful correction*, if not also a *rebuke*. *Then, in today's story, when Bartimaeus perceptively asks for the recovery of his sight, Jesus responds mercifully to the physically blind man.*

- So this tells us *something rather important*. For if we talk to our Lord *at all*, we also are likely to make *requests* of him. And, **what we ask Jesus to do may –or may not– be in accord with his will for us; and it may not fit with God’s plans for us**. James and John asked for something that would *diminish* their experience of *participating in* God’s Kingdom. Their request was not in accord with God’s will for them. Whereas Bartimaeus asked for something that *opened up* the fullness of the Kingdom. And, it made him “well.” So, let’s draw out the *implications* of this contrast. Because **Jesus is not just ‘the answer to all our questions.’ Jesus also acts as ‘the question who prompts our best answers.’**
- **Jesus therefore asks us the same question: What do you want me to do for you?** This could be *his most challenging question to our congregation*, and not just to us as individuals! *If we, then, could as a congregation only request one thing of him, what would it be?*
- It would be tempting to answer in terms of **money**. For, *surely*, this would be among the *first* things we would think of. “*Jesus,*” we might want to say to him, “*please have someone write Grace Church a check for five million dollars! If you do that for us, then all shall be well!*” I wonder how many of us would *affirm* this answer. After all, *as someone recently observed*, ‘*our spiritual balance sheet is strong*. It’s just *our financial balance sheet* that is *weak*.’
- *Sound* as it is, *this way of approaching things might also be* how we fall into James and John’s way of thinking. For as a parish, **which of these two ‘balance sheets’ gets more of our attention~ the financial or the spiritual?** It’s always possible for us to see our parish *more* in *worldly way* than we do in a *Kingdom* one. Now, it’s **not** that money is *un-important*. Instead, it’s about **why** money may be important for us and for our mission.

- So then, *what might be another and different answer to Jesus' question?* When he asks us *what we want him to do for us*, we might –as an alternative – say this: “Jesus, *we want you to grow our spiritual maturity!*” In other words, ‘*Lord, we want to see you completely*. We want a *whole* rather than *partial* view of who you are. And, *we want to see ourselves whole*, rather than have only a *partial* view of who *we* are!’
- *Seeing Jesus whole* means seeing his mission whole, seeing his work of redemption whole, and seeing our congregation’s place in his kingdom whole. After all, *what good would five million dollars be if we don't see him in a complete, rather than in a partial way?* When we reflect on the sweep of his Gospel, we will begin to see that *this* is what Mark is getting at.
- Here we must push *further* our understanding of these paired stories in Mark’s Gospel. The two disciples who asked for a share in Jesus’ glory were *already* his followers. They journeyed *with him* along what Mark calls ‘*the way*.’ And yet, like the ten others, *they didn't hear him when he told them three times that he was headed toward suffering and death*. By contrast, *the blind beggar and outcast, Bartimaeus faced every day on the edge between life and death*. And he responded to Jesus in a much more open way. When Jesus tells him to *go*, that his faith has made him *well*, *he immediately regains his sight*. He then *follows* Jesus on ‘*the way*.’ Compare Bartimaeus with James and John, as well as the other ten, and ask yourself this question: *who among them was more fully ‘on the way’ with Jesus? Who among them was now seeing, and seeing Jesus more wholly, as well as themselves?*
- All this, then, begs an even bigger question: *are we ‘on the way’ with Jesus, as he heads toward Jerusalem, to face suffering and death?* How we embrace and respond to this question is critical to our becoming and being a ‘*mission–alive*’ congregation. Being a mission-alive congregation provides

the horizon for our best answers to [his](#) question, “[What do you want me to do for you?](#)” And once again, the familiar words of St. Richard of Chichester provide a good way to express our answer: “[Day by day, dear Lord, of thee three things \[we\] pray: to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly, day by day.](#)”<sup>3</sup>



James Tissot, *The Two Blind Men at Jericho*

**Mark 10:46-52**

Jesus and his disciples came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” 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.” So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. 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.”** Jesus said to him, “**Go; your faith has made you well.**” **Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.**

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> See Mark 10:51, 52: “The blind man said to him, ‘My teacher, let me see again;’” and, “immediately he regained his sight...”

<sup>2</sup> See Mark 10:35-45.

<sup>3</sup> Hymn #654, The Hymnal 1982.