

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: BREATHLESS

(studies in the Gospel of Mark)

“By the road...” to “On the road...” Study #22

(Mark 10:46-52)

Introduction: Off the sidelines...

It's possible that you have already heard of Larry (aka “Lawnchair Larry”) Walters. If you have, bear with me. If you haven't, you're in for a treat.¹

Back in 1982, Larry fulfilled his lifetime dream of flying, and he did it in his own inimitable way.

He purchased a full tank of helium gas and over forty weather balloons from a nearby Army/Navy Surplus store. He anchored his very comfortable Sears lawn chair to the bumper of his Jeep and then filled up the balloons.

He had a plan. He was going to cut the tethers holding him to earth, float lazily up to thirty feet or so above his girlfriend's backyard, and watch the scenery from his flying perch.

He was prepared to spend a few hours in the air, loaded down with a plate of sandwiches, a six pack of Miller Lite and a BB gun to shoot the balloons, one by one, when he was ready to descend.

¹ The story has been widely disbelieved by skeptics, but it actually happened. Fact checkers “truthorfiction.com” and “darwinawards.com” have both independently verified Larry's exploit.

Things didn't go exactly as planned.

When his friends cut the tethers that were holding the lawn chair to the Jeep, Larry and his lawnchair were catapulted from earth by the four foot diameter balloons. He finally leveled off, not at 30 feet, but at 16,000 feet elevation.

At that height he felt that he couldn't risk shooting any of the balloons. So he stayed up there, drifting with the wind, cold and scared out of his mind, holding his beer and sandwiches, for more than fourteen hours.

During his adventure, Larry crossed the primary flight corridor for Los Angeles International Airport, where he startled more than a few Trans World Airlines and Delta pilots, who radioed in reports of a guy in a floating by in a lawnchair.

Eventually, Larry gathered the nerve to shoot a few balloons, and slowly descended. (The hanging tethers tangled and caught in a power line, blacking out a Long Beach neighborhood for 20 minutes.) When Larry climbed down to safety, he was immediately arrested by waiting members of the LAPD.

As he was led away in handcuffs, a reporter dispatched to cover the story asked him why he had done it. Larry replied, “*A man can't just sit around.*”

Larry couldn't just sit there. OK.

Even if it's hard to admire his thought process, we can at least applaud Larry's spunk. He didn't just sit there. Sitting there accomplishes nothing.

And because he got active, Larry Walters fulfilled his lifelong dream of flying.

Whether we are talking about adventure thrills, nurturing a marriage, parenting the next generation of champions, building a career, or maintaining a vibrant spiritual life, Larry got it right. You can't just sit there.

Today we are going to see a man who serves as our model for Christ-following discipleship. Jesus called and he couldn't "just sit there." He followed. Today, Jesus is going to call you to follow, too.

Mark, Act 1 - Meet Jesus and crew

This morning we come to the end of the second major section of Mark's Gospel. The first section, which I'll call "Act 1," introduced us to Jesus and His disciples.

We watched as He and they traveled throughout Galilee, teaching and performing miracles in the northern part of Palestine.

Mark, Act 3 - Jesus, in Jerusalem

For us, Act 3 will begin in a couple of weeks with Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem and will end with the conclusion of His earthly career.

Mark, Act 2 - "Come, follow Me"

Act 2, which we have been following for the last several weeks, has traced Jesus' travels through lots of Gentile territory as well as the Jewish region of Galilee.

He and His disciples went as far north as Caesarea Philippi, where Peter made the Great Confession that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah of God.

He was transfigured before three of His disciples. He performed miracles of healing and exorcism. He taught His disciples and the multitudes of people who followed Him about God. He predicted His coming suffering and death (three times!).

Always He surprises us with the topsy-turvy values of His Kingdom. Always He explains what are the traits of those who follow Him. And always, always, He is inviting people to follow Him.

In this morning's passage we come to the end of His approach to Jerusalem. This that we will see today is the final incident Mark records prior to His entrance into the holy city.

This morning we witness the healing of a blind man, Bartimaeus. The whole section (Act 2) began with the healing of a blind man (see Mark 8) and, fittingly, it ends the same way.

As is typical in Act 2, Jesus and His disciples have been traveling. They have been moving south through the region of the Decapolis and then into the Herod-controlled land of Perea.

Both Perea and Decapolis were outside of the land of the Jews, located on the eastern side of the Jordan River. These lands were populated by Gentiles who also got to hear the Good News of God's love.

When Jesus and His followers got near the southern end of the Jordan, which empties into the northern end of the Dead Sea, they crossed the river.

Interestingly enough, they actually crossed at just about the same point that Joshua and the Jews had crossed before them, on a major ancient highway right across from the city of Jericho, some fourteen hundred years earlier.²

Setting the Scene (v. 46a)

[46] Then they came to Jericho.

Jericho

Jericho's history

Today, Jericho is one of the oldest, if not the oldest, continuously inhabited cities on earth. Even by Jesus' time, Jericho was already one of the oldest cities in the world.

Old and New Jericho

And Jericho had had - even by the first century - a very active history, having been destroyed and rebuilt on several occasions.

² Noted theologian, S. Lewis Johnson, remarked, "Here is the second Joshua performing miracles in Jericho, again."

Archaeological discoveries tell us that the Jericho Jesus entered was actually two cities. There was the Old City, which was badly deteriorated.

And then there was the New Jericho, which lay south of the old city and had been built by Herod as a magnificent winter palace. New Jericho was famous for its beauty and extravagance.

Geography

From Jericho, which was located about five miles from the Jordan River, but still in the Jordan River valley, Jesus will soon continue traveling another twenty miles southwest to Jerusalem. And that journey will be a tough slog.

Jericho was the last town a traveler would reach before hitting Jerusalem, and from there it was uphill all the way. From the Sea of Galilee southward, the Jordan River is all below sea level. By the time it hits the Dead Sea, the inland lake with the world's lowest elevation, the water level sits at 1388 feet below sea level.

At the Jericho crossing, the Jordan is already 840 feet below sea level and Jerusalem is right about 2700 feet above sea level. The trip from Jericho to Jerusalem was a strenuous 3,500 foot elevation gain that Jesus and His disciples will soon tackle.

But before they depart Jericho and move to Jerusalem, Jesus has a fascinating exchange with a very desperate man. As usual, He and His disciples are traveling with a crowd.

A Blind Beggar Cries Out (vv. 46b-48)

Bartimaeus, the Blind (v. 46b)

Jesus and company and more (v. 46b)

[46b]...And as He was leaving Jericho with His disciples and a large crowd

In other passages, Mark wants us to know that the crowds were following Jesus. Here, it is not at all clear that this is the case.

At that time of year, there were always crowds on the Jericho Road heading toward Jerusalem. After all, it was the Passover season and Jewish pilgrims by the thousands were traveling from all over the place to make it to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover festival.

The crowd on this day might have been simply traveling in the same direction Jesus was going.

We also don't know if Jesus and the disciples had spent much time in Jericho, if He had taught there, if He had healed people there, or if He had performed other miracles there.

As far as we know this was the first time Jesus had been to Jericho, and they may have simply been passing through. But as they exited the old city en route to Herod's New Jericho to the south, everyone could see him. He was always there.

A sore sight for eyes

[46b]...a blind beggar named Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the road.

It would not have been an unusual sight to see a blind beggar in the ancient world outside of the gates of a major city. And there was Bartimaeus, strategically placed between the two Jerichos.

There not being much of a governmental social safety net in the ancient world, the disabled were taken care of by family and friends. The disabled, however, were often responsible to provide for themselves as much as possible, even if that was by means of begging, counting on the charity of strangers.

This blind beggar's name *Bartimaeus*. His name means, literally, "the son of Timaeus."

Mark includes phrase “the son of Timaeus” for his Gentile readers who would not have recognized that “bar” was the Hebrew word for “son.”³

The inclusion of the name here is remarkable. Nowhere else in the Gospels are we given the name of someone Jesus heals. Only here. Only Bartimaeus is named out of the dozens of healing miracles we find in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.⁴

The last person outside of the small group of disciples we have seen Jesus interact with was a rich, young ruler. He was prestigious and ambitious and influential. He’s not named. Bartimaeus is named, though, and he is neither rich, politically connected, nor influential.

From this brief story, we don’t know very much about Bartimaeus - his age, his general health, his family situation, how long he had been blind or why - only that he is a blind beggar.

There is something about this story that is uniquely powerful and warm. Mark wants us to sit up and take notice of this story. Bartimaeus has something to tell us.

He is sitting by the road. It may be that someone (family member? friend?) positioned Bartimaeus there every day so that he could beg.

But that position - “*by the road*” - speaks to his place in society as well as to his location. He’s off to the side. He’s marginalized.

He’s on the sidelines of life, hanging out on the shoulder of the road, as far removed on the scale of social acceptability from the rich, young ruler as you could imagine.

³ The fact that Mark includes Bartimaeus’ name and his father’s name indicates that they both probably became familiar characters in the early church and among the earliest followers.

⁴ Neither Matthew nor Luke (who both record the miracle) record the name. Matthew tells us that there were two blind men, which Mark doesn’t contradict. He only names Bartimaeus. Luke says that Jesus was entering the city of Jericho - and they were, in fact, entering New Jericho as they left Old Jericho.

On this day, as Bartimaeus was sitting there, hoping for charity, he heard the buzz of an approaching crowd. He picked up a few words here, a phrase or two there.

He recognized the name “Jesus” - but then Jesus was a popular Jewish name in those days. There were lots of guys named, Jesus/Joshua/Yeshua.

As the crowd got closer, Bartimaeus realized that the Jesus he’s hearing about is the Jesus he’s been hearing about for months and months. Jesus the rabbi, Jesus the healer.

THAT Jesus has never been to Jericho. Now He’s here! Bartimaeus shouts hopefully into the crowd.

Bartimaeus, the Bold (vv. 47-48)

Calling out to THIS Jesus (v. 47)

The Nazarene (v. 47a)

[47] When he heard that it was Jesus the Nazarene⁵...

You can sense Bartimaeus’ eagerness. He recognized that THIS Jesus was THAT Jesus. “Jesus the Nazarene” singled THIS Jesus out from among all of the other Jesus’ of His day.

We know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and that His home base for ministry was Capernaum. But He was raised in Nazareth, a small city out on the plains, midway between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean.

So, Jesus was a Nazarene.

But blind Bartimaeus called out to Jesus with another identifier, which shows that he might not have eyesight, but he had great insight.

⁵ At the first and the last healing miracles in Mark, Jesus is identified as a Nazarene.

Son of David (v. 47b)

[47b]...he began to cry out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

This is Bartimaeus’ recognition that Jesus was the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. How exactly he knew that is anyone’s guess. But sitting by the road day after day, you hear things.

This Jesus is in King David’s genealogy. This Jesus is a leader and a healer and a teacher - and this Jesus is going up to Jerusalem.

So, Bartimaeus, thoughtful man that he was, had heard enough to know. He put two and two together and identified this Jesus as the One his people have been waiting for for centuries.

When Bartimaeus called out, “*Son of David*” he knew that he was addressing David’s greater Son, the Messiah.⁶ And we’re cheering Bartimaeus on for insight and for boldness.

But there were those in the crowd who were not pleased with his shouts, and they were intent on shouting him down.

Silencing Bartimaeus (v. 48a)

[48a] Many were sternly telling him to be quiet...⁷

Earlier in Mark’s Gospel (10:13-16), the disciples had told some folks who were bringing children to Jesus to keep them away. They thought that Jesus was way too busy for children.

Do you remember His response? Jesus was indignant - completely incensed at the disciples’ attempt to keep kids away from Him.

With that memory still fresh in their minds, I’m suspicious that it was not the disciples who were “shushing” Bartimaeus.

But I can see other folks on the road doing it. Those who were from Jericho had seen (and probably heard from) Bartimaeus for years. They thought of him as a nuisance, a nobody, a blight.

So, an unidentified “many” people out of the crowd were telling blind Bartimaeus to pipe down. “*Jesus isn’t interested in you or in what you - and people like you! - have to say.*” - all of which prompted Bartimaeus to ramp up the intensity of his crying out to Jesus.

He got louder and more insistent!

Bartimaeus: Hard to silence (v. 48b)

[48b]...but he kept crying out all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

I love this guy! Nothing keeps Bartimaeus from crying out for Jesus’ attention and help. Opposition only serves to fan the flame of his persistence.

He understood that Jesus was the One who would bring Him God’s mercy. And so, with undeterred tenacity and in the face of a cold-hearted dismissal from lots and lots of people, he would not back down.

Bartimaeus could “see” into the heart of Jesus much more clearly than those who were sighted and were walking alongside of Him.

He had been hoping that Jesus would take notice as he screamed out his plea - and his fondest hopes were fulfilled.

⁶ 2 Samuel 7:11-14 - Messiah will come through David.

⁷ This is the first and only time in Mark that a crowd tried to silence someone. Usually it was Jesus who silenced people after He healed them. Jesus regularly sought to silence people to keep them from premature (or demonic) confessions.

On the Way to Jesus (vv. 49-50)

The Call of Jesus (v. 49)

Jesus stops and speaks (v. 49a)

[49a] And Jesus stopped and said, “Call him here.”⁸

At the risk of melodrama, I want you to consider what is involved in what Jesus does and says here.

Everything is on the line for Bartimaeus. He has put himself “out there” hoping against hope that this Jesus both CAN do something for him and that He WILL do something for him. All of his apples are in the Jesus basket.

If Jesus ignores him, he’s lost. If Jesus just walks on by and doesn’t help, he’s hopeless.

That’s the situation from Bartimaeus’ position. Consider the situation from Jesus’ standpoint.

He is surrounded by His disciples and by a large crowd. The large crowd may not all be following Jesus, but I can easily picture them getting caught up in the mystique of this increasingly famous/infamous Rabbi as He marches toward Jerusalem.

Off to the side is Bartimaeus, the poor, blind, beggar. And we all know that kings on the road to claim their crown don’t stop for the Bartimaeus’ of the world.

At this season in America, you and I are getting a front row seat to view what candidates for public office do on the road to election.

They hob-knob with the rich and famous. They spend time with the movers and shakers. They invest personal capital where it will provide the most “bang for the buck.”

And Jesus the Messiah stopped dead in His tracks in the middle of the road when He heard Bartimaeus’ cries over the sound of the crowd. He stopped to listen. (and the throng with Him would have stopped, too)

On those words, “**Jesus stopped...**” hang all of Bartimaeus’ hopes and dreams. Stopping for a beggar? Really? Really.

Jesus ordered the man to be brought to Him - and the crowd’s mood took a 180 degree shift.

Cheerleaders (?) (v. 49b)

[49b]...So they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take courage, stand up! He is calling for you.”

All of a sudden, the fickle crowd turned friendly and encouraging. (Crowds do that, as any candidate for public office will tell you. And the same crowd that will sing “Hosanna” as Jesus marches into Jerusalem will yell “Crucify Him” a little later in the week.)

Jesus’ welcoming invitation rebuked those who had been “sternly” telling him to be quiet and so they promptly changed their tune. They are now as warm and enthusiastic as they had previously been dismissive.

Their words, “**Stand up!**” probably imply that someone was going to have to walk him over to where Jesus was.

Bartimaeus was on the side of the road and Jesus was in the road. Bartimaeus was blind, so he would need assistance, right? Wrong!

The Flight to Jesus (v. 50)

[50] Throwing aside his cloak, he jumped up and came to Jesus.

⁸ Thus far, Jesus has followed a policy of keeping His messiahship somewhat secret. He begins to relax that policy now, not bothering to rebuke or silence Bartimaeus for his “Son of David” address because, as He gets closer and closer to Jerusalem it must be understood that He is entering as the Messiah and will die as the Messiah.

This blind man, seated by the side of the road, responded to the news that Jesus wanted to talk with him by jumping up, throwing off his outer cloak and running - BLIND - across the street to Jesus.

Mark tells the story with such an economy of words that you could miss the impact of this scene if you don't think about it.

Ignoring the possibility of obstacles, potholes, rocks, stumps and people in the way, the BLIND MAN ran to Jesus. The blind beggar who had been sitting, pathetic, on the side of the road, is now standing with Jesus.

Jesus immediately engaged Bartimaeus in conversation.

Once Blind, Now Seeing (vv. 51-52)

Q & A, with Jesus (v. 51)

Jesus' familiar question (v. 51a)

[51a] And answering him, Jesus said, "What do you want Me to do for you?"

We've heard that question before. It is exactly, word for word, the question Jesus asked James and John when they told Him that they wanted Him to do for them whatever they asked. (10:36)

There, Jesus wanted to expose the selfish hearts of the two apostles. Here, I think Jesus wanted to expose the sincerity of Bartimaeus' faith.

At the same time, do you wonder if Jesus' question had seemed almost silly?

I mean, what does He expect that a blind man would want? What would a hungry man want? What would a lame man want?

And of course Jesus knew what this blind man wanted. But Bartimaeus was more than a problem to be dealt with. He was more than a project. He was a person to be pursued and engaged.

So Jesus asked the question.

Bartimaeus' simple response (v. 51b)

[51b]...And the blind man said to Him, "Rabboni, I want to regain my sight!"

Crystal clear communication. No hesitation at all. *"I'm blind. I want to see."*⁹

He calls Jesus, "Rabboni." This is a highly exalted way to refer to a Jewish rabbi. Very respectful, almost reverent.

And Jesus immediately granted him his request

Healed and Heeling (v. 52)

Faith is the victory (v. 52a)

[52] And Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well."

- Faith cries out to Jesus, asking for mercy.
- Faith rushes across an unseen street to get to Jesus.
- Faith expresses the deepest longing of the heart.

This man had faith and Jesus rewarded his faith with sight.

Now this is the final miracle of healing we will see in the Gospel of Mark. From the point that Jesus enters Jerusalem forward, there are other priorities, but no healings.

This one, though, is sweet. Jesus pronounced the healing word - and it was as good as done.

⁹ The New American Standard Bible likely has the sense right in its translation, with *"...regain my sight!"* If Bartimaeus had seen previously, or Mark likely would have told us, as John does in John 9 when Jesus healed a man who had been born blind.

Faithfulness is the privilege (v. 52b)

[52b]...Immediately he regained his sight and began following Him on the road.

Two things happen in the final half verse of this story, and they are both huge.

First, there is the miracle of the gift of sight. Blind Bartimaeus sees! With no medical treatment, ointment, incantations, or physical touch, he is healed - just like that - by the power of Jesus, called to the scene by the blind man's faith.

You and I have gathered here today to worship a miracle-working Jesus. He walked on water, gave sight to the blind, made the lame walk, and freed the captives from slavery to sin. And this is our Jesus. He is the One who has all power over the physical world as surely as He saves our souls from eternal death.

Second, and equally remarkable, is the direction of Bartimaeus' life. Now that he is able to see, he takes his first steps on the road as a follower of Jesus.

He has no idea where Jesus is going or what he is getting himself into. He doesn't know that Jesus is going to embrace a cross or that following Him may mean a cross. All he knows is that wherever Jesus is going, he's going, too.

Bartimaeus is a genuine, authentic Christ-following disciple. He's is the real deal.

Conclusion:

The tenth chapter of Mark's Gospel is filled with references to following Jesus, to disciples, and to discipleship. But no one in the chapter follows Jesus with the faith and insight of Bartimaeus.

The last potential recruit for Christ-following we saw was the rich, young ruler. Admirable, respectable, influential, graced with 20/20 vision, he walked away, blinded to what was really important by his stuff.

And then we come across Bartimaeus, a blind beggar who "saw" Jesus for who He really was. He started out seated **by the road**, sidelined and marginalized, but ended up following Jesus **on the road**.

Today, Bartimaeus, this named recipient of Jesus' grace and mercy, is both our hero AND our example.

Have you heard Jesus invite you to come to Him? And having heard Him, have you stood up, thrown off whatever you have been trusting and run - blind! - straight to Him?

Did He open your eyes to the wonder of His salvation? Did Jesus forgive you of your sin and welcome you into God's family, call you "son" or "daughter" and give you His Spirit?

He did? Then walk with Him. Pray. Love. Give. Serve. Tell.

Join Bartimaeus and follow Him, wherever He leads, on the road to discipleship.