

“The Loud-Mouthed Follower”

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Mark 10:46-52

Sometimes around the 4th of July I ask myself whether I consider myself to be patriotic. To which I usually answer Yes. Probably less so than some, but probably more so than others. To a certain extent I didn't have a choice. I was born into patriotism, or at least Americanism. I'm the granddaughter of the person who edited the poetry of the great American poet Walt Whitman, and I'm the daughter of an American historian. I hang a flag out my window, I listen to American music. I try to read the Declaration of Independence annually. Perhaps like many of you, however, mine is not an unquestioning patriotism. There are different ways to have a voice as a citizen in a democracy. I reserve the right to question the authority of my government and its powers. Which, after all, is one of the rights my forefathers fought for. It was one of the truths they “declared to be self-evident.”

I am also a Christian, and I strive to be a follower of Christ. Here, too, I probably follow Christ less so than some but more so than others. And just as there are different ways to be patriotic, there are different ways to be Christian, too, and to get a voice on public issues.

This is not a sermon on public issues or on politics. It is rather a sermon about style—about How. It's about getting the courage to voice the truth and to be outspoken when necessary, on whatever it is you feel called to be outspoken about. Because if there were ever a time to figure out how to get a voice, it is now. In both the life of a citizen and the life of faith, there are times that become especially charged and that call upon us with urgency to declare publicly as well as privately what these commitments of ours really mean, and to act upon them. I think we are in one of those times. It's a time to step up and get a voice.

It is not easy. There are better ways and worse ways of speaking out. I have sometimes gotten it wrong. I have shown the spotlight more on myself than on the issue I'm talking about. I have at times been a loud, noisy activist who has jumped at the chance to stir up trouble. I am not always sure when my own demanding and outspoken behavior is genuine Christian witness or just me being loud. We don't have particularly good role models in our elected and appointed political leaders right now. It seems that social and political discourse is at an all-time low. I'd like to avoid being obnoxious, and yet at the same time, one has to be somewhat fearless these days to get any attention. I am fond of quoting the famous line that feminists like to say: “*Polite* women seldom make history,” but when is impoliteness a sign of courageous leadership and when is it just . . . impoliteness? In the end, what I want to be is a faithful follower who is *both* courageous *and* humble, both a witness for truth and a steady ally for the long haul.

I turn to the character of Bartimaeus at times like this. He was outspoken in the right way. The story of B may seem like an odd choice, but if you bear with me, I think you will see why I like this guy and why I would like to emulate him.

Imagine along with me for a moment about the setting of this story. Jesus and his disciples have come to Jericho and are now leaving. Jericho was about fifteen miles outside of Jerusalem, so the road they were on was a route frequently taken by the faithful on pilgrimage to the city. It was probably a convenient spot for someone like B, a blind man and a beggar, to hang out and ask people for money. Anyway, the story goes that B was sitting somewhere off to the side of the road when Jesus and his disciples passed, surrounded by a large crowd. Suddenly B speaks. And he doesn't just speak, he shouts. Apparently he has found out that it is Jesus who is passing by, and he

is compelled to start shouting, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Now the name he uses is significant. No other ordinary person in the Gospel story has called Jesus by this title, Son of David. To address Jesus this way is to recognize him as the Messiah and signals that B was both astute and humble.

But everybody else tries to shut him up. We don’t know quite why. Perhaps they are uncomfortable because this beggar is insinuating himself into their agenda and disrupting their mission. (You know, I can’t help but think of the panhandlers we are seeing more often in Lexington, now that the ordinance on panhandling has been changed. There are some who would like these folks to go away, but I’m not one of them. You never know whom you might encounter when you stop to read a beggar’s sign or give them some money.) Perhaps they are embarrassed by how loud he is, how outrageously he is insisting on aid, instead of asking in a more polite and appropriate manner for their help. Perhaps they think he is being a bit too melodramatic, complaining about his condition in an unattractive and self-pitying way. In any event, for whatever reason, they try to get him to hush up.

But he will not. He “cries out even more loudly.” And Jesus hears him, stops, and stands still. He asks that B be brought over to him. Now this moment in the story changes everything. Now that they realize that Jesus is willing to acknowledge B, the crowd quickly reassesses their estimation of him. Suddenly he is important. They turn their attention to him as one to be respected and encouraged. They tell him to get up. “Take heart,” they say, which means: don’t be afraid, have courage, it will be okay. Since B is clearly someone who already has plenty of courage, their words reveal more about their own revised attitude than anything else. Now they get it.

So the story ends by B throwing off his cloak, going to Jesus and Jesus asking him the question, “What do you want me to do for you?” with B replying that he wants his sight. And Jesus says that his faith has already made him well. All at once, B can see again. He joins the crowd, now a follower too, and they all continue down the road.

Often this story is interpreted this way: Mark the Gospel writer is telling us that like B you can be a “follower” even if you are not one of the “disciples.” Just because the twelve disciples were specially chosen and were given the privilege of forming Jesus’ inner circle—just because they have the right credentials, if you will—does not mean that they alone are to be considered Jesus’ followers. Other, lesser figures like B can appear on the scene and even upstage them, displaying more disciple-like qualities than the disciples themselves. In this way, all of us are given hope that we, too, may be followers of Jesus. Many take this to be the moral of this story.

But this doesn’t quite complete it for me. For the question still nags at me: Why this guy? Surely in his ministry, Jesus was approached by all sorts of loudmouths who clamored after him for mercy. What sets B apart? There’s nothing in the story that initially jumps out at you to prove that B is special, an especially good candidate for Christian followership. If it were me, I might have just seen in him another person who was asking too much. As I said a moment ago, it is not immediately easy to discern who is setting a good example and who is just another noisy troublemaker.

So I went back and read the story more carefully, and I think I found three clues in the text itself about the kind of guy B was. Now you may say I’m reading into the story, but I believe the clues are there. First, he had confidence. B appears to be confident, right from the start, that the life-giving power of God will heal him. It is as if he simply knows he will be healed. And he places his trust in God, not just anyone. He recognizes Jesus as the Son of God, not just another miracle worker. As the text of the hymn we will sing shortly goes, when all our hope on God is founded, those who follow shall not fall.

Second, B displays what I call enlightened self-interest. At first, it appears that when Jesus invites him to name the thing he wants, B acts just like most people would: he names the thing he wants. Self-interest can sometimes get expressed as ambitious striving after more power or wealth for one's own sake. But B's self-interest seems different. The last line of the story is important: B "regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way." B wanted his sight back, yes, but he wanted it back so that he could belong to Jesus' ministry. He wanted to leave the side of the road and enter the movement—literally to shift from marginality to participation. B may have been self-interested but he was not self-ish. He is not, I think, just another loud-mouthed troublemaker, because the trouble he makes is trouble made out of genuine trust in God and in the interest of participating in the kingdom.

The third clue that B is a genuine follower of Christ is that he stayed the course. Not all the supplicants of Jesus did this. Now B is not mentioned again in the bible as we have inherited it, but if you do a little historical research you can learn that he became a fairly prominent figure within the early Christian community. B stayed in the movement when others undoubtedly fled after Jesus' death, and that may be the truest mark of genuine discipleship.

Therefore, in sum, we gain in our unlikely friend B a picture of what following Jesus might ought to really look like: someone who places their trust in God, who speaks up to voice self-interest in order that they might participate more fully in the kingdom, and who stays committed to the way of Jesus. Today's Bartimaeuses are the unlikely but genuine followers who refuse to be hushed, who refuse to ask too little of God, and who are not afraid to risk making a scene when those around them are getting it wrong.

I could suggest some names of people who I think set such an example, but you can probably think of your own. Maybe you are thinking of yourself right now. Instead, I will close with an example from literature. It is from a short story called "Saint Ursula and Her Maidens" taken from a collection published in 2001 called *Living with Saints* by Roman Catholic writer Mary O'Connell. Her stories are delightful, often irreverent, wickedly funny. What she does is to portray how the lives of historical female saints might be embodied in actual women living today.

A long time ago the saint named Ursula was martyred at sea, along with 1,000 virgins. To portray that imaginatively in contemporary terms, O'Connell has a group of women with disabilities taking a water exercise class at the Ursuline Community Center pool. O'Connell contrasts the exercisers, who are loud and somewhat irreverent, with the pious and overzealous class instructor who conducts the disabilities exercise class with forced cheer. One of the exercisers is a nun named, as chance would have it, Sister Barbara. She is in the class because she has lupus. Sister Barbara decides to speak her mind when the instructor tries unhelpfully to cheer her students up when they get to talking about their various sufferings. (The story offers a refreshing take on disability, by the way, especially welcome for us this morning given the theme of blindness in our Scripture text.)

The group is working on their arm circles but their pace has slowed down as they commiserate with one another over the past week.

The instructor claps her hands together. "Ladies!" she says. "We need to get back to our exercises! Don't be such a group of sad sacks! Remember, when we feel tempted to indulge in self-pity, we must think of others who are less fortunate."

"Saint Ursula, help us," Sister Barbara says.

... The teacher smiles dreamily. "Think of Christopher Reeve. Superman sits strapped in a chair, all day, completely helpless. Why, he can't lift a spoon. I saw him on TV the other night, and though he can't move a muscle, he still has zest for life. We can all learn a lesson from his courage."

"Excuse me, miss," Sister Barbara says.

That “miss” sounds awfully righteous, partly because the teacher’s age qualifies her to be a ma’am. And maybe the teacher mistakes Sister Barbara for a dotty old woman with a gray bubble cut and a flowered lavender swimsuit, because she turns and grins like she’s about to be offered a plate of brownies and says, “Yes?”

“It is not right,” Sister Barbara says, “to use the misfortune of others to cheer ourselves. It is an insult to Christopher Reeve that his recent tragedy would be used as a catalyst to brighten people’s lives. You can be quite sure that your pity is of no use to Christopher Reeve. You can be quite sure that in the eyes of God, the greatest sin is gleeful, self-congratulatory compassion.”

. . . The teacher is still smiling at Sister Barbara, but in a dazed, frightened way. She suddenly remembers a dental appointment and tells everyone to exercise at her own pace.

. . . Sister Barbara asks, “Did I come on too strong? No one likes a bully.”

My hope for all of us is that we find our own voice and our own way to speak up, whether we sound like Sister Barbara or some other way. It’s not a sin to be outspoken nor to speak up for what we need and want and for what others need and want. May we learn from the story of B and from other stories of our faith how to come on strong, so that we might be courageous and humble citizens of our land and of Christ’s kingdom. Amen.