

Sermon for Sunday, May 5, 1974 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"FAITH BY THE SIDE OF THE ROAD"
St. Mark 10:46-52

Text: "And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; rise, he is calling you.'" St. Mark 10:49

Bartimeus lived in the valley country that lay along the Jordan River. He lived in a town called Jericho. It was a beautiful city and its name meant "City of Palms." Archaeologists tell us that the buildings were plastered with brilliant colors, and that one of the most beautiful buildings of the ancient world was located here. It was the home of Herod the Great. Made of sandstone and plastered over, it was painted red, black, and gold. Its floors were of beautiful mosaic tile. Off in the distance behind the city, framing it against a white background, lay the snow-covered slopes of Mt. Hermon.

Jericho was an exciting place to live. Richly decorated caravans passed through trailing an odor of strange spices. There were beautiful silks to be seen and fine wares from all over the world. Yet for all the beauty and excitement of Jericho, it meant little to Bartimeus. He had never thrilled with excitement over the strange trappings of the camels; he had never thrilled at the beauty of the city gardens; he had never stood awed at the splendor of Herod's castle; he had never gazed in wonder at the snowy slopes of Mt. Hermon; he had never marveled at the sight of the gaily painted city. You see, Bartimeus was blind.

I would have you notice first the poorness of Bartimeus. He was surrounded by plenty and prosperity. He was surrounded by beauty and splendor. Yet, life passed him by--a poor blind boy who could only sit by the side of the road near the city gate and beg for a living.

Have you ever felt like Bartimeus--that the sounds and smells of life come to you, but somehow you are sitting on the side of the road while life passes you by? Have you sometimes felt that life had so much to offer, that it was so rich and beautiful with so much to offer, but somehow you were missing it--just a beggar on the side of life's road? I know I feel that way sometimes. Life has so much adventure, so much of excitement, so much that is important going on--but somehow we seem never able to get in the main stream of it--we are not really where the action is.

When we are young we have hopes and dreams and aspirations about life. But suddenly we discover that the years have dropped swiftly away and so many of the things we hope and dreamed for were never accomplished. Then we are like Bartimeus, sitting by the side of the road with life passing us by.

I would have you notice second that Bartimeus was undoubtedly lonely, too. There was so much he could not share in because he was blind and not everybody had time for a blind boy. And each of us, in one way or another, shares in the loneliness that must have belonged to Bartimeus--the loneliness of being somehow shut off from others, the loneliness of not fully belonging, or perhaps the loneliness of a sorrow or burden that no one can really share with us.

Some of you may remember Jack Kerouac died. He is the father of the so-called "beat" generation, the fore-runner of the so-called "hippie" era. Back in the fifties and

early sixties his novels were very influential, especially his book "On the Road." At his death his wife said, "He had been drinking heavily for the past few days. He was a very lonely man." To the reporters she said, "Nobody came to see him while he was alive, why should you come now when he can't talk to you." Here was a man who truly sat by the side of life's road and somehow it passed him by. He knew in the end what it was like to be lonely and cut off.

But something happened in the life of Bartimeus for Jesus came to Jericho. Jesus had been there before. It was here that he had been entertained by Zacchaeus, it was here that he told his parable of the pounds, and when he told the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus spoke of the road to Jericho as though he knew it well.

So Bartimeus had heard of Jesus. He had heard the people talking about his teachings, of his miracles, of the healings he performed. And surely he sensed the ripple of excitement that traveled through the people as Jesus passed that way again. So Bartimeus acted. Out of the depths of his loneliness, out of the depths of his isolation, there was ripped from his soul a cry of agony and pleading, a cry of desperation, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me."

When you are lonely and afraid; when the dark night of some fear closes fast about you, to whom do you cry? When your fondest dreams lay smashed, when your highest ambitions are punctured, when your heart is broken, when your own world lies shattered into a thousand fragments, to whom do you cry? When the future seems like the darkness of the blind, when no ray of hope pierces the gloom, when you stumble through the night of some tragedy, to whom do you cry?

That day as he sat by the side of the road Bartimeus was poor, he was lonely, and he had just one hope left--Jesus. Bartimeus certainly did not fully understand who Jesus was--the Son of God; perhaps he did not fully understand the meaning of his teachings or the significance of his miracles. But one thing he understood fully--if he had any hope at all, it lay in Jesus. Yes, he knew that if there was a God in the world, if there was such a thing as love in the universe, if there was such a thing as meaning and purpose to life, that the only hope left for finding it was in Jesus.

As we look at our world today we see man's incredible technological achievements on every side. Yet, in spite of our scientific ability, we have not learned to handle human relationships, human greed, human lust, human brutality, human selfishness. So it is that man holds the fruits of his technology in the savage hands of a spiritual primitive. It is fascinating to me to remember that so many of the astronauts who went to the moon came back strangely changed. You will remember that one took Holy Communion on the moon, others read scripture, one read a prayer, one came back to become an evangelist because they realized that the technology of man is inadequate. If life was to have any meaning somehow it lay in a rediscovery of God. Yes, if our world does have any hope, it must lay in Jesus.

Then there is another thing we need to notice about Bartimeus, and it was his persistence. Bartimeus wasn't a very important person and maybe his life didn't matter to anyone. There is no indication that anyone cared whether he lived or died, whether he saw or not. He was just a poor, blind boy sitting by the wayside begging for a living. He could have thought that day, "I'm too insignificant to matter to him." He could have said to himself, "What does he care for a poor, blind boy." He could have thought, "Jesus has no time for someone like me." He could have said, "My life means nothing to anyone, why should it matter to this stranger." Yes, he could have

thought any of those things. Instead, he began to cry out to Jesus for help, for mercy. And when others tried to shut him up, when they told him in effect to "cool it," the Bible tells us that he "cried out all the more, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Why wouldn't he shut up? Why wouldn't he be stopped? Why did he refuse to be silenced? I think it was because deep down he knew that if Jesus was who they said he was, that if Jesus was really the Son of God, then Bartimeus would be important to him. Bartimeus had discovered what is the most important truth in all the world. It is the truth that if God's world makes any sense, if God's love is real, if life has any meaning to it other than a biological accident, then Bartimeus would be important to Jesus. The Bible tells us that Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." The faith of Bartimeus was justified by the side of the road that day. He was important to Jesus.

In many ways all of us are blind this morning, beggars in a world whose real potential we have missed. We are so often impoverished within, surrounded by the luxuries of the times in which we live but inwardly, poverty stricken. I know that many of you are as lonely as I am. I know there is a loneliness that characterizes most of us. Like Bartimeus, we need our eyes opened, too, that we might see what life is all about, that we might see its true meaning. It is to this need that Jesus speaks today. As He called a poor, blind boy so many centuries ago, so He calls us today. Whoever you are this morning, whatever your needs, Jesus cares about you and you are important to him. If God is love, and if life has any meaning at all, He cares about a poor blind Bartimeus and he cares about you.

Do you know that if Bartimeus had been the only person in the world that Jesus cared enough about him that he would have died for just Bartimeus? And did you know that if you were the only person in the world he would have done the same for you--that's how important you are to Jesus.

The figure of Jesus upon that pain-drenched cross of Calvary, enduring the agony of nail-pierced hands and feet, the creeping paralysis of a terrible death, knowing the indescribable agony of being cut off from God--that is his way of saying that he cares about you, that your life matters to him. Whoever you are this morning, sitting there by the side of life's road, as there came to Bartimeus, so the words come to you, "Take heart; rise, he is calling you."