

Sermon for Sunday, September 23, 1979, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri 63105

"THE MAN WHO WANTED TO CHANGE"

St. Mark 10:46-52

Text: "And Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you? And the blind man said to him, 'Master, let me receive my sight.'"

The Bible says that Bartimaeus cried out to Jesus. And why shouldn't he cry out? After all, he was a man at the end of his rope and he had nothing to lose. He was just a beggar and a blind one at that. No matter what happened, he couldn't possibly be any worse off than he was already. In that respect Bartimaeus was like most of us. We cry out to Jesus only when we are at the end of our rope. We cry out to Jesus only when things couldn't possibly be any worse. In a way it is sad that so many of us never give God much consideration until the roof caves in or the bottom falls out or life blows up.

When Bartimaeus cried out he hardly knew what to ask for. We don't know how much he knew about Jesus, but whatever he knew it was mostly secondhand. He was blind. He had never seen the hand of Jesus reach out to heal a leper or raise a sick person. He had never seen the compassion in his face or the love in his eyes as he talked about the kingdom of God. At best he had heard him from the fringe of the crowd, but more likely he had heard people talking about Jesus as they passed by his begging place on the street corner. Probably all he knew was that some great religious person was in town and when he knew that Jesus was passing by he cried out--and since he didn't quite know what to ask for, he simply cried out for mercy.

And sometimes this is our trouble, too. So often we don't know exactly what God can do. Is he some sort of magician who waves a magic wand? Is he some sort of benevolent Santa who gives presents to people who are good? Is he some trouble-shooter that you call out when the fuse box blows or the plumbing won't work? Just exactly what is the role of God? What can he do and what do you ask him for? Do you ask him to sprinkle stardust on some boy you've set your cap for but who won't give you a tumble? Do you ask him to make a business deal turn out okay when you've used very poor judgment? Do you ask him to give you an "A" when you haven't cracked a book? Do you ask him to transform a marriage in two days that you've spent twenty years destroying? What is God good for anyway?

So because most of us aren't really sure about that, we cry out for mercy--and by that we mean for God to clean up the mess we are in. So Bartimaeus hollered for help, he shouted for mercy. The fact is, he was pretty desperate.

But people didn't like this beggar interfering with things. They rebuked him and told him to be silent. In effect they said, "Cool it, man. Don't you know the famous rabbi from Nazareth is here? We have heard a lot about him and we want to see what will happen. Don't interfere with things with your problem." You know, I think we church people must seem like that sometimes to people who really need Jesus, who really need help. We get all comfortable in our worship and ritual and we don't want anything to intrude or disturb us. Don't bother us with your drinking problem; don't bother us with your sex problem; don't bother us with your hang-up; don't bring your financial problems to us; don't bring your broken marriage in here. No, don't you sinners interrupt our worship with your problems, can't you see we are worshipping God?

Somehow that is all wrong, isn't it? Isn't it strange that those of us who want to walk with Jesus are often caught telling the Bartimaeuses of the world--the people who desperately need Jesus-- to keep quiet. But Bartimaeus wasn't to be put off

this time. Whatever hope he had was passing by and if he didn't attract his attention he would be forever gone. So the Bible says that he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me".

And then the Bible says, "And Jesus stopped...." I tell you those are some of the most exciting words in the New Testament! Yes, "And Jesus stopped..." He always hears the cry of the distressed. Do you remember the story of the woman who had an illness for many years? The Bible tells us she had gone to all of the doctors, sought every cure, and had spent all she had. Yet, the Bible says that she was not any better. But this woman heard about Jesus, too. She said in her heart, "If I could but touch the hem of his garment, I would be made well." So when Jesus passed by in the crowd, she pressed through the throng of people. Just as he passed by, she reached out her hand and her finger tips brushed against his robe. As she reached out in faith to touch him the Bible says that immediately she was healed. But then an exciting thing happens. The Bible tells us that Jesus stopped and turned to his disciples and asked them who had touched him. His disciples were amazed. "How can you ask such a question", they said, "See how the multitude is pressed about you on every side and you ask who touched you? That is a foolish question." Yet, the Bible tells us that Jesus searched the face of the crowd with his eyes until at last the woman came forward in fear and trembling to confess to him what had happened. Yes, he searched the crowd for her face. Isn't that just like Jesus? When a soul in distress cries out to him, that person is very important. She was no face lost in the crowd. She was a person in need, a person who was important and he searched until he found her.

We hear a lot today about the exploding birth rate and the overburdening of the world with a mass of humanity that threatens to crush the world. And in this world of ours with its exploding population all of us are sensitive to the increasing depersonalization, the dehumanizing of life. But I want to tell you this morning that in all of our world there is not a single person, not a single face that is lost in the crowd as far as Jesus is concerned. The Bible tells us that it is not the will of our Father that a single person should perish, but that all should come to salvation. The Bible tells us that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whosoever believeth might not perish. Yes, Jesus asked, "Who touched me?" Someone had reached out to him in her need and he was aware of her as a person, as someone of worth.

The people said to Bartimaeus, "Take heart...he is calling you". I want to say to you this morning, whatever need you may have brought here today, take heart...rise-- Jesus is calling you, he is able to deal with your needs. It doesn't matter what need you may have brought here this morning. Jesus is concerned about you as a person. He knows your name. You are important to him. Here was Bartimaeus, a blind man, an insignificant person in the eyes of the world, a man of no position or authority or importance. But when he cries out in his need to Jesus, the Bible says, "And Jesus stopped...."

Listen very carefully, however, to what happened next. Bartimaeus had made a general plea for mercy, a broad, sweeping request for help. But when Jesus stopped, Bartimaeus discovered the necessity of being specific. Jesus said to Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" That is, be specific. Tell me exactly what you want me to do.

You see, it isn't enough to ask God to make you good in general. God can help you be good only in particular. God demands that we be specific about our sins, that

we dare to be honest about our faults. Suppose, for example, I ask God to make me loving but in my heart I am harboring a grudge against someone. In a perverse sort of way I enjoy that grudge. It gives me a certain pleasure to grind my teeth in righteous indignation over what someone has done to me. Now, God can't help me to be loving in general until I let him make me loving in particular. I have to open the door to this closet in the heart where I keep my grudge.

See how it works? D. Perry Ginn is a well-known Southern Baptist minister who tells the story of burying an old man who had been dead 19 years and a little boy who had been dead thirty years. The old man was his father and the little boy was himself. People thought of Perry as warm, friendly and able to communicate but he thought of himself as a frightened little boy, wanting desperately to be accepted and loved, yet with a horrible dread of being rejected. As it turned out, his father had been mean and cruel as well as an alcoholic and Perry had hated him with part of himself yet loved him, too, because he was his father. One day a friend said to him, "Perry, have you ever told your father that you forgive him?" "No," came the answer, "and I can't because he died 19 years ago." No doubt the next words of the friend were given of God. "No, your father is not dead. You have kept him alive all these years and you have never buried him. Now, Perry, through God's grace and help I am going to become your father. And as your father, I ask you what you would like to say to me." All kinds of conflicting emotions clamored inside Perry. Then he blurted out, "I hate your guts." "Is that all you want to say to me, Perry?" His mouth was dry and fear welled up inside of him. "I'm afraid you are going to knock me down. But I love you, too." "Why do you hate me?" "Because of what you did to me." Still speaking as his father the friend said, "I know I made a mess of things in my own life and for you and the family. But there is nothing I can do about it now. It's in the past and I am dead. All I can do is ask you to forgive me. Perry, will you forgive me? Forgive me and let me rest in my grave? Perry faltered, "I want to, but I can't." "I don't feel forgiveness, and the words would be dishonest if I spoke them." "But forgiveness is not a feeling. It is an act of the will. It is something you do." The words burst out of Perry, "Then I do forgive you, and you can rest now." As he spoke the words, compassion began to rise within him and for the first time he began to feel forgiveness toward his father. Then the two men bowed their heads and in prayer quietly and reverently buried a father who had been dead 19 years and a frightened little boy who had been dead a long time, too. Do you see? God could not make Perry forgiving in general, but he could help him be forgiving in particular. And in the process the ghosts of an old man and a little boy were laid to rest.

So Bartimaeus stood there that day before Jesus and Jesus said to him, "Be specific. What do you want me to do for you." Because you have eyes and know what it is to see, you would automatically think that the natural thing would be for Bartimaeus to ask for his sight. But look at it from his side. He had never seen so in one sense he couldn't know what he was missing. He had a way of life. He even had his own niche in society. He had learned to make his living by begging. To suddenly see would ruin all of that. He would have to give up so many things he was secure with and familiar with. It would be like starting life all over again with all of the insecurities that went with it. He couldn't beg any more. People would have new expectations of him. He would have to learn to make a living, to be self-reliant, self-sufficient. He could he be sure that seeing would be worth what it cost? People think they want to be different, but don't want to pay the price, don't want to bear the pain.

But Bartimaeus did the daring thing, the far-reaching thing, the life-changing thing. He said to Jesus, "Master, let me receive my sight." Do you want to be a better person, a more loving person? You must do the daring thing, the far-reaching thing, the life-changing thing. You must, in fact, bring your needs to God in particular. I don't know what your particular needs or sins are this morning. But I don't need to know because you know what they are. It may be a quick temper, it may be an ego problem, it may be some sex hang-up, it may be a dirty mouth or a gossiping tongue, it may be a problem of hate towards another, it may be alcoholism, it may be some theft, some lie, some act of dishonesty-but God cannot help you in general, he can only help you in particular. When Bartimaeus stood where you stand, he made a life-changing decision. He said, "Master, let me receive my sight." When Perry Ginn stood where you stand he made a life-changing decision. He said, "Father I do forgive you, and you can rest now." I want to say to you this morning, "Take heart--he is calling you." And as he calls you he asks you to be specific about your need--to dare to be honest. In this moment as you are conscious of Jesus' presence, of his love and concern for you--what will you ask for?