

“Paying Attention”

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In Mark’s gospel we meet Bartimaeus. Mark actually gives him a name; Matthew and Luke also have stories of the blind being healed, but we never learn their names. This story often gets celebrated as a story of healing. It often gets announced as evidence of how powerful and kind Jesus is. And I agree; Jesus was and is both powerful and kind. But let’s consider this time that the real teacher in the story is Bartimaeus-- not Jesus. Let’s pay attention to what he says and does.

Persons with disabilities often find their voices and even their bodies pushed to the margins of society. That’s certainly where we find Bartimaeus at the beginning of the gospel passage; he is “by the roadside” somewhere between Jericho and Jerusalem. The Greek describes Bartimaeus literally as “by the way”-- as if he was an afterthought or a footnote. And that’s how everyone else was used to treating him-- passing him by in their comings and goings without noticing, or maybe tossing a coin into his cloak if they were feeling generous that day.

That’s just how things went. That is, until Bartimaeus asks Jesus to pay attention.

Pay attention to me. We demand attention from people in our lives, by what we wear, what we say, what we do. Our moods signal to others when we need attention and what kind we need-- sometimes before we even know it is attention we long for. Others shrink from the spotlight of attention. Some, more comfortable watching from the sidelines, pay attention to everything happening but duck and run when the spotlight swings towards them. Some say that whether you are a first-born, a middle child, a youngest child, or an only child determines what kind of attention you are used to getting or commanding.

Pay attention to me. What words or actions do the loved ones in your life use to tell you to slow down, pause, and take notice? One friend may ask this in one way; another friend, another way. And when I say “ask” for attention, we know that’s not always with those exact words. If you live with a child, they probably use a hundred different ways, and that’s just in one day. A lover or spouse may also have an array of ways of asking for attention, ranging from simple to seductive, from inviting to “if you don’t take this stinking garbage out I’m going to scream!” It could be an interesting after-church conversation to have with someone, asking them what sorts of things they do or say to get attention-- and then sharing with them your signs of needing attention as well.

And then there is the line, “There’s something I need to tell you.” No matter who the audience is, ears perk up in attention whenever that line is said.

Groups also seek attention. Despite the pandemic, we have seen coalitions of people marching for attention to their cause, whether it is to Stop Asian Hate; announce and demand that Black Lives Matter; or to try to convince a country that a vote has been stolen. With signs and megaphones, groups demand listeners to pay attention; and when that does not work, sometimes chaos ensues.

Isn't it interesting that we use the phrase "pay" attention, as if attention is some sort of currency? Perhaps that's because it *costs* something from the giver of attention: it costs time; it costs energy; it costs a re-shifting of priorities; it can cost attention or privilege you would rather have for yourself; it can cost leaving what feels comfortable to try something that may feel uncomfortable.

When Bartimaeus demands Jesus' attention, shouting, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" his demands for attention clearly cost something to the disciples and the large crowd surrounding Jesus, and it seems they fear it will cost something even more to Jesus. They sternly order him to be quiet. I wonder, are they afraid this man's demands for attention will cost them their own moment as the focus of Jesus' attention? Do they worry that Jesus associating with a blind beggar will somehow diminish his authority? Do they worry-- as some people have been prone to think with people who are homeless, mentally ill, physically disabled, or sick with chronic illness, that somehow Bartimaeus' vulnerability will somehow infect them, too? Or, maybe the blind beggar's demands would cost their spots in the status quo. As Walter Brueggemann, a scholar of the Hebrew Bible, states,

"The people's effort to silence the blind beggar reflects their wish to keep him a beggar-- dependent and blind. If the man were healed, if he were to shake off his powerlessness, he would begin to demand food and care... It might mean that someone else would lose status. The blind beggar's silence, on the other hand, would ensure that the status quo would be maintained."¹

To Bartimaeus, the crowd's efforts to hush him did not stop his desire to reach out to Jesus. He simply cried out even more loudly.

But Jesus stood still. In the face of growing anxiety and jockeying over who deserves attention, Jesus' stillness redirects the energy of the crowd. This is a practice I would like to cultivate in my life: to slow down. To be still. To listen. Too often, I know I follow the energy of other people's anxiety rather than find a way to redirect it. Slow down. Be still. Listen.

Then Jesus tells the crowd, "Call him here!"

In an instant, the crowd's anxieties *are* redirected. Instead of expending lots of energy trying to shush Bartimaeus and put him back in the margins where they thought he belonged, their attention has shifted. They are interested and ready to see what will happen between Jesus

¹ Walter Brueggemann, "Theological Education: Healing the Blind Beggar,," *The Christian Century* (February 5, 1986) p. 114.

and Bartimaeus. They are suddenly paying Bartimaeus attention. "Take heart. Get up. He is calling you." the crowd tells Bartimaeus.

I read this story in a bible study workshop with teenagers years ago. One of their comments which I appreciated and took note of came from the teenager who said this: "I don't like how it sounds when the disciples are all nice all of the sudden. It feels like when you do something in middle school and everyone says, 'Oh, that is so nasty!' but then a popular kid does the same thing, and then everyone wants to do that thing, too."

I'm not sure it would be fair to call Jesus the popular kid, considering how things ended up for him, betrayed, abandoned, in court, then on the cross. Maybe in Bartimaeus' disability, Jesus saw a future vision of himself and his own vulnerability. My seminary professor for Sociology of Religion, Dr. Nancy Eiesland, lived with a lifetime disability that kept her either walking with a cane or in a wheelchair. She liked to call people without disabilities the "temporarily able-bodied." Whatever it was Jesus saw in Bartimaeus, it became *worth* the cost of Jesus's attention. But instead of looking at Bartimaeus and making the assumption of what Bartimaeus wanted or needed, Jesus simply asked Bartimaeus: "What do you want me to do for you?"

At this point, Bartimaeus has changed positions, from being hunched over, a by-the-way beggar, to one who throws off his cloak, springs up to meet Jesus, and asks him, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus then tells him, "Go, your faith has made you well." The Greek term Jesus uses for wellness here-- *sezoken*-- is the same word for salvation. However, the passage speaks nothing of salvation of the soul. Bartimaeus' salvation is to be enjoyed in his present life. The other interesting point is that Jesus announces Bartimaeus' salvation, and *then* Bartimaeus regains his sight. It seems as if it is Bartimaeus' seeking and asking which makes him whole, well, and saved, rather than Jesus' healing.

We can learn from Bartimaeus and what he teaches us about attention. Attention always has a cost. Yesterday I attended a bat mitzvah for a family friend. It was in a Conservative schull, and so the service of Torah was 2.5 hours long, and almost entirely in Hebrew. About an hour and a half into the service, some leaders from the congregation passed around baskets of candy for us to take. I wondered if this practice was to keep people who forgot to eat their breakfast from passing out. But after the new bat mitzvah finished chanting her Torah portion, the congregation stood and started throwing candy at her-- and the kids flug those kit-kats with the greatest and swiftest arms. It represented the sweetness of the word of Torah. But I secretly wondered if the candy ritual was also a way of keeping the youngest of the congregation--- okay, and maybe some older ones too, especially those who don't know Hebrew-- engaged in what was happening: candy as the cost of their attention.

I would like to say that God's attention doesn't cost us anything. But if that were true, it really wouldn't matter so much, would it? It is risky to ask God for attention. What if God doesn't answer? What if Jesus asks me to do something I don't want to do? What if the answer is "no?" In addition to these costs, there are also the costs of prioritizing our time, our focus, our energy, our vulnerability, our attention... to be in the attention of the holy.

Maybe Bartimaeus-- from his place on the margins-- did not have much to lose. He cast off any shame surrounding him as easily as he cast off the cloak that covered him. And, just as Jesus has been telling us as we've been reading our way through Mark, when he said "the last will be first and the first will be last," by the end of the passage, Bartimaeus had changed in his position, from *by the way*, to *in the way*-- as he raised his voice and stopped Jesus and the entire crowd, to *on the way*, as a follower of Jesus, accompanying him to whatever would happen next.

What is worth the cost of your attention? *Who* is worth the cost of your attention? What is the cost of *God's* attention to you? Are you off to the side of Jesus's way? Or are you willing to get *in* Jesus's way? As a crowd, if we Christians say we are *on the way* with Jesus, are we actually willing to pay attention to whom we might meet along the way?

There is something I need to tell you. I need to tell myself, too. How we spend our attention matters, spiritually. So, let's take moments when we stop. Where we stand still. Where we slow down. Where we truly notice-- not just with seeing, but with hearing. With feeling. Or with the best sense God has given us. I believe-- I truly do-- that attention-- to God, to one another, and to our lives-- is worth the price.