

BARTIMAEUS

(Mark 10:46-52)

The story of Bartimaeus is an experience of the healing power of faith that leads to discipleship. It begins in identification with the humiliation of a blind beggar sitting in the dust. It ends with his sight restored as he follows Jesus on the way up to Jerusalem. In a unique way, this story concretizes the power of the faith of persons who are oppressed by physical or mental handicaps, patriarchal social structures, racial discrimination, and economic systems over which they have no control. It is an invitation to allow our own personal and communal humiliation to be seen in the context of Bartimaeus's faith in Jesus as the Christ.

The Story

And they came to Jericho.
And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great multitude, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside.

And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"
And many rebuked him, telling him to shut up.

But he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"
And Jesus stopped and said, "Call him."

And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; rise, he is calling you."
And throwing off his mantle he sprang up and came to Jesus.

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."

And Jesus said to him, "Go your way; your faith has made you well."
And immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way.

Learning the Story

Verbal Threads

"Jericho." The first episode is tied together by Jericho: "He came to Jericho"/"as he was leaving Jericho" (vs. 46).

"Cried out... 'Son of David, have mercy on me.' " The first sentences in the episodes of Bartimaeus's crying out for Jesus have this extensive verbal thread (vss. 47-48).

"Call." Jesus' calling Bartimaeus is linked together by that key word. A literal translation is "Jesus said, 'Call him.' They called the blind man saying, 'Take heart, get up, he is calling you'" (vs. 49).

"Receive sight"/"see again." The last sentences of the final episodes are linked by this verbal thread, which is more accurately translated: "that I might see again"/"immediately he could see again" (vss. 51-52).

The first two episodes have a typical ABAC episodic structure in which the first sentences are in synonymous parallelism and the last are in antithetical parallelism. That is, Bartimaeus cries, the crowd tells him to shut up, Bartimaeus cries again louder, and Jesus says, "Call him."

Also notice the manner in which the beginning and ending of the story are linked together by the phrase "the way." The first episode ends with Bartimaeus sitting "by the roadside [way]" begging; the story ends with Bartimaeus following him "on the way" (vss. 46,52). It is a marvelously concise encapsulation of the transformation of Bartimaeus's life.

This story is easy to learn because of the clarity and simplicity of its structure: setting, first cry, second cry, Jesus' call, Jesus' question and Bartimaeus's answer, the healing. Once the structure is recognized and the verbal threads are recognized, remembering the story is simply a matter of rethinking the structure and its linkages.

Listening to the Story

The story's opening establishes the depth of Bartimaeus's shame by a series of implicit contrasts to pride and glory. The first association with glory in the story is Jericho itself. The foremost associations of Jericho in the tradition of Israel are with the glory of Joshua's victory "when the walls came tumbling down." Jericho is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, having been occupied at least since 3000 B.C. and perhaps much earlier.

The introduction of Bartimaeus's name calls further attention to his shame. The sentence has an unusual word order, literally, "the son of Timaeus, Bartimaeus, a blind man, was sitting beside the way begging." Usually an explanation of a name such as "the son of Timaeus" would follow rather than precede the name, for example, "Rabboni (which means 'Teacher')" (John 20:16). The unusual order calls attention to the meaning of Bartimaeus's name. "Timaeus" is based on the Greek word *tima*, which means "honor, reverence"; the name means "one who is honored, revered." *Bar* means "son" in Aramaic; hence, Bartimaeus is "a son of honor." This twice reiterated emphasis on his "honor" is immediately connected with his present condition, "a blind man, sitting beside the road begging." Another dimension of this poignant contrast between honor and shame is implicit in Bartimaeus's request to Jesus (vs. 51). The word Bartimaeus uses (*anablepo*) literally means "to see again," with the implication that once he could see but now he is blind. Thus, the story opens and closes with a highly sympathetic description of Bartimaeus.

His cry is introduced by an inside view, "When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth... " (vs. 47). The narrator takes us inside Bartimaeus's head and the darkness of his blindness as he hears the cries of Jesus' name being called out by the crowd. This creates a close identification with Bartimaeus.

Bartimaeus's name for Jesus is highly controversial. "Son of David" (vss. 47-48) has never been used as a title for Jesus earlier in the Gospel narrative. The title is associated with the Messiah, who would, as a legitimate heir in the royal succession, restore the Davidic monarchy and the glory of David's kingdom. The phrase "have mercy" is taken directly from

the Psalms and is usually translated "be gracious" in the RSV (e.g., Pss. 6:2; 9:13; 30:10; 41:4; 86:3). Bartimaeus's second cry is even louder and more intense than the first.

The crowd's response is first to rebuke and then to encourage him (vss. 48-49). The implication of the rebuke is that they were ashamed of his crying out. But they quickly take their cue from Jesus and change their attitude toward Bartimaeus.

The atmosphere of Bartimaeus's response to Jesus' call is pure enthusiasm (vs. 50). The gestures are built into the story: throwing off the mantle, leaping up and coming to Jesus.

Jesus' question – "What do you want me to do for you?" – to Bartimaeus is connected with the tradition of relationships between prophets and their disciples. Tracing this verbal thread back in time, it leads first to Jesus' identical question to James and John in the immediately preceding story. The account is as follows:

And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him, and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." (Mark 10:35-37)

Their request is not granted. Instead, Jesus as a prophet instructs them about the limits of his own power. Furthermore, the other disciples' anger requires Jesus to give them a lesson in service.

This question is, however, not original with Jesus. In II Kings, when Elijah is about to be taken up into heaven, Elijah and Elisha cross the Jordan on dry land:

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Ask what I shall do for you, before I am taken from you." And Elisha said, "I pray you, let me inherit a double share of your spirit." And he said, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it shall be so for you; but if you do not see me, it shall not be so." (II Kings 2:9-10)

Elijah is taken up into heaven; Elisha sees him and picks up the mantle of Elijah. He strikes the water with the mantle and the waters part. This sign confirms that Elisha has received Elijah's spirit and power.

This tradition clarifies the seriousness of the question in the Bartimaeus story. Prophets ask this question of their disciples when they are about to be taken away from them. And the issue is the transferral of power. In contrast to the self-initiated request of James and John for power that is not granted, Bartimaeus's request is granted. Bartimaeus and his mantle are thereby associated with a distinguished stream of prophetic tradition.

Jesus' response to Bartimaeus's request is also distinctive in the healing narrative tradition. Jesus does nothing: no healing words, no laying on of hands. A literal translation of Jesus' words to the blind man is "Go. Your faith has saved you." The verb is an imperative. It is usually translated "go your way" and is presented as Jesus' command to Bartimaeus to go and live his life in freedom from his blindness. The other possibility is that it means "Go on, see" and refers back to his request for sight. In this interpretation, the command is a response to Bartimaeus's request, which refers back to the power of his own faith. To paraphrase, "Why do you ask me to heal you? Go on, your faith has already saved you." In this telling, Jesus' response is a word of affirmation and encouragement in which he gives permission for Bartimaeus to act on the power implicit in his own faith. This motif occurs in earlier healing stories of Mark (the paralytic, 2:5; the woman with a flow of blood, 5:34,36; see also 6:6; 9:23). The most direct connection is to the story of the woman. She falls at his feet in fear and trembling and tells him the whole story of what has happened (5:33). The implied sources of her fear are both the possibility of public exposure of her shame and the assumption that Jesus will be furious at her for making him unclean by her secret touch. Jesus' response is

then surprising and overwhelmingly affirmative of the woman's own role in her healing: "Daughter, your faith has saved you. Go in peace and be healed permanently of your disease" (5:34). Jesus' word to Bartimaeus has the same character. It is an affirmation of his courage and faith and is an encouragement to allow that faith to be fully lived out.

The culmination of the story is Bartimaeus's receiving his sight and following Jesus on the way. The ending is a celebration of victory. The shortness of the sentence is a sign that the narrator made this a climactic moment, with full emphasis on the change in Bartimaeus's status. He has gone from being a blind beggar to being a follower of the Messiah, the son of David.

Connections

The situations from your own experience that may provide vital connections with this story are relatively easy to identify: primary experiences of humiliation and shame, of being in the dust; crying out for help; both hearing and encouraging someone who needs help; experiences of the dawning of hope in the midst of desperation; conversations in which few words are spoken but the rest of your life is on the line. The most striking element of this story is Bartimaeus's cry of faith. Therefore, finding the link to the integrity and authenticity of Bartimaeus's crying out is the key to making this story come alive.

But, in addition to exploring this on your own, there are ways of exploring this story in a group that can make it a resource for the faith of not only individuals but also communities. In his book *Transforming Bible Study*, Walter Wink has outlined a method of Bible study called communal exegesis. In this process, the role of the leader is to ask questions that will lead a group into exploring a biblical text themselves. These questions move naturally from the context and meaning of biblical materials in their own historical context to their meaning now. This approach to biblical study has proven to be highly generative for the transformation of persons and local churches.

In a recent doctor of ministry demonstration project, Margaret Eddy has explored the integration of communal exegesis with a storytelling approach to biblical narratives. The group with whom she worked is called the East Harlem Healing Community. It is an ecumenical group of black, Hispanic, and white women and men who have actively explored the biblical storytelling tradition as a resource for personal and communal healing and reconciliation. Her project was focused on the story of Bartimaeus and the development of a series of storytelling experiences around this story.

Preparing to lead a group in communal exegesis begins with the careful identification of a series of questions that are both focused and open-ended. The role of the leader is to guide the group into an exploration of these questions without giving "the answers." In the process, the group discovers connections between the story and their own experience that could never emerge without the openness created by the group's own exploration.

The following questions were developed by Margaret Eddy for communal exegesis of the Bartimaeus story. They were used in various forms in different workshops, but they comprise a good overview of the process. Prior to this communal growing of the story, the group always learns the words of the story so that they can tell it with relative comfort.

1. Is the setting of Jericho important to Mark's telling of the story? Where is Jesus going, and for what purpose? What faith associations might Jericho have for first-century Christians?

2. Have the group look up Joshua, Chapters 2, 3, and 6; and II Kings, Chapter 2. Besides the location at or near Jericho, what theme do these stories have in common? Are there narrative threads, especially in II Kings 2, that connect with the Bartimaeus story?

3. What does the story tell us about Bartimaeus? How would you characterize him? Paint a verbal, visual picture of the scene.
4. What is the significance of Bartimaeus' cry in the first episode? (Background comment: This is the first time Mark has used the messianic title "Son of David" in his gospel. Jesus has only been referred to as "Son of Man," and by the demons, who are rebuked, as "Son of God.")
5. Why did many (crowd/disciples) rebuke Bartimaeus? What are the various possibilities? How has Mark used the "rebuke" theme throughout his gospel (leader may need to fill in briefly here)? What possible relationships do you see to Mark 8:31-33?
6. Have you ever experienced being rebuked? What is your most vivid memory? What was your response? What was Bartimaeus' response? What was Jesus' response in Mark 8:33?
7. What reversal of plot action do we find in the second episode in the calling? What are those who say "Take heart" doing? What are they projecting on Jesus?
8. In what ways have you been surprised by a change in people's attitudes towards you or your group? What dynamics caused the change?
9. What function does the mantle have in this story? What connections, similarities, and differences are there between Bartimaeus' mantle and the clothes and mantle in the Elijah-Elisha story (II Kings 2:8, 12-14)?
10. From a counseling or healing point of view, what is the significance of Jesus' question in the third episode (v. 51)?
11. Elijah asks this same question of Elisha (II Kings 2:9), and Jesus asks James and John, his disciples, this question in the preceding story (Mark 10:36). What contrasts or comparisons could Mark be trying to suggest to his audience?
12. Why is it important that we specify our need? If Jesus (or God or the Holy Spirit) asked you, "What do you want me to do for you?" what would you answer right now? What is your own most crucial need? Take a moment right now and make a list of some of your needs. Then close your eyes and visualize yourself in the place of Bartimaeus in the story. See what answer comes from deep within now, when Jesus asks you the question.
13. What does Bartimaeus risk in asking for his sight? What are all the possible meanings of "sight" in this passage? Give as many synonyms as possible.
14. Just within this story, how has Bartimaeus shown his faith? Give concrete word images for the meaning of faith, just drawn from this text.
15. What instruction does Jesus give Bartimaeus? What does he actually do? Make up a little story of what might have happened next, on the way.
16. Early Christians were called "followers of the Way" (Acts 24:14). What would the implication of the last line be to them? How might they feel about Bartimaeus, in the light of their own political and social situation? What can be understood from this story about discipleship? (Eddy 1982, 133-35)

The value of this process for storytelling is that one finds a wide range of connections with the story from the experience of a whole community. Not only is the story enriched but also the common experience on which the community is based is broadened and deepened.

Telling the Story: The Gospel as Storytelling in Worship

A principal occasion when the stories of the acts of God are told in the Church is public worship. The Scripture readings and the sermon are the two times in the service of the Word when the stories of the tradition are told in a variety of ways. And, in the Eucharistic liturgy, we retell the story of the institution of this holy meal.

The Scripture Lesson and Storytelling

The centrality of the narrative traditions of the Scriptures in the life of the community of Israel is reflected in the fact that the culmination of the Scriptural readings in both Judaism and Christianity is the reading of the sacred narratives. In Judaism, it is the Torah reading; in Christianity, the Gospel reading. The importance of the Gospel reading is dramatized in many

parts of the Church by the congregation standing for the reading. And the liturgical actions of the taking of the Torah scroll from the Ark of the Covenant and the Gospel procession add further solemnity to the reading of the sacred stories in the synagogue and in some churches.

Just as reading stories to children in a library or at home is a form of storytelling, so also reading the sacred stories in worship is a form of storytelling. Unfortunately, these storytelling occasions have tended to become largely meaningless, especially within the Church, because of a lack of preparation and expectation on the part of both the readers and the listeners. Particularly in Protestant communities, the Scripture lesson has increasingly become a mere pretext for the sermon.

There are several reasons for this. One is the tradition of the monotone reading. For centuries in Christianity and still within the Orthodox Church and in Judaism, the Scriptures were always chanted. This chant was mellifluous and richly varied in its musical texture and melody. But, as the distance between the storytelling traditions and liturgical chant has increased, the chant has become more and more restricted in its musical range. This trend has culminated in the melody for cantillation becoming one note, a monotone. This mode of recital has come to be associated with a certain holiness and objectivity of presentation of the sacred stories. Unfortunately, it is often almost wholly devoid of meaning. People do not listen to the reading and it becomes a mere formal recital of words that we go through in order to get on to something meaningful.

In most of the Western Church, both Catholic and Protestant, the Scriptures are now read without chant. It has become common practice among both clerical and lay lectors that one prepares minimally or not at all for the reading of the Scriptures. And the result is predictable: no one, either reader or congregation, expects anything to happen during the reading of the Scriptures, and sure enough, nothing happens. The meaningfulness of the reading of the Scriptures in worship has largely died.

A source of renewal may be a recovery of the storytelling sources of public reading of the sacred narratives. Many pastors have found that memorizing and telling the Gospel narratives from memory has made the Scripture lessons more meaningful for the congregation. There is vitality and energy when the stories of the actions of God are told directly to the congregation without the presence of a manuscript or the formality of the lecturn.

While I would not recommend this as a general practice, the reason is only that it takes a great deal of experience and skill to tell sacred stories well in public worship. But everyone who reads a biblical narrative in worship should memorize the story and learn its dynamics as a story as a preparation for reading the story in worship. The mode of recital will vary in its formality with the character of the congregation's liturgical life. But, regardless of the mode, the readings will only be meaningful to the listeners if they have first become meaningful to the person who is telling the story. Whether a manuscript and lectern are present is relatively insignificant in comparison to the centrality of preparation and emotional investment in the telling of the story. If a person has gone through the processes outlined in this book, the stories will be more meaningful and memorable when they are recited in public worship.

The Gospel as Storytelling and Preaching

The role of narratives in general and of the Gospel narratives in particular has been severely restricted in contemporary preaching. Biblical narratives have been reduced to a source of ideas or theological content for the sermon. And narratives in general have been

reduced to serving as didactic illustrations for ideas. As a result, the Word of God has increasingly come to be associated with the theology that is abstracted out of the biblical tradition rather than with the experiencing of the biblical tradition itself. As a result, the Word of God has often come to be more closely associated with the sermon than with the Scriptures. In my experience of contemporary preaching, this association is ironic since the sermon is so often *in no apparent way* an expression of the Word of God. The Scriptures, on the other, always have, at least potentially, a direct and perceivable relationship with God's Word.

This relationship between theological ideas and stories can be seen clearly in the typical structure of contemporary sermons:

Theme or central idea
 Point 1 (development of some dimension of the idea)
 Illustration
 Point 2 (further development of the idea)
 Illustration
 Point 3
 Illustration
 Closing summary

In this structure, the organizing principle of the sermon is the idea while the narratives serve as illustrations of the idea. The effect on narrative is that stories are only used as didactic tales that point to a moral or concretize an idea. This is a perfectly valid role for narrative. But when seen in the context of the rich range of narrative meanings, it is an impoverishment of its potential.

In no sense am I critical of this mode of preaching. It has been a means by which God's Word is authentically interpreted and made present for people now. And I am confident that it will continue to be.

But it is also possible to take the structure and promise of storytelling more seriously and to preach a sermon by retelling a biblical story. At the heart of this possibility is a reversal of the relationship between narrative and ideas. In a biblical narrative sermon, the structure of the narrative provides the structure and theological concepts make connections with the episodes of the story. In the Bartimaeus story, for example, an outline might be as follows:

Introduction: primary connection with the story
 Bartimaeus's cry
 The experience of persons who are sick or oppressed
 Jesus' response
 The Christology of Jesus as God who hears our cries
 The question and response
 The importance of naming our need/prayer
 The healing and Bartimaeus's following
 Power of faith already present but unperceived; its power in the history of the church and today.
 Conclusion

Thus, in a story sermon, the structure of the story provides the structure of the sermon and theological ideas and contemporary experiences serve as ways of connecting the episodes of the story with contemporary thought. Rather than just outlining a theory, however, it might be helpful for me to give an example of such a story sermon. I preached the following sermon on Bartimaeus at the commencement of New York Theological Seminary, an interdenominational seminary that trains pastors for the rich variety of Christian communions in the New York metropolitan area.

The Cry of Faith

The story of Bartimaeus is a great story for a commencement because it is the story of the beginning of a whole new life. And I offer it to God and to each of you as a gift on this special day when we celebrate the commencement of new beginnings.

Let me tell you the story. Jesus had come down through the wilderness into Jericho, a tropical oasis near the Dead Sea, the deepest depression in the earth. And Jesus was leaving Jericho with a large crowd of followers. Now when Bartimaeus heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he started to cry out like a street corner preacher, "Son of David, Jesus, have mercy on me!" Bartimaeus didn't mess around trying to be sophisticated or cool. He mounted a one-man demonstration.

Well, the people who were standing around were embarrassed, and they told him to be quiet. "Shut up, Bartimaeus. He's a big deal rabbi. He's not going to pay any attention to you." It was a reflection on their personality as a town. They didn't want a beggar messing up their reputation. But Bartimaeus kept on yelling all the louder, "Son of David, have mercy on me."

It was the cry of an oppressed man. He had been down, down so long that he almost couldn't hope any more. He was a victim, a victim of an accident of health. He had been able to see; the word at the end of the story means "to see again." But by some accident or illness he had been blinded and he couldn't see. And that took away his ability to work and his power. He had to become a beggar, humiliated, sitting in the dust. And he is one of so many people who are put down as the result of the accidents of history. It's humiliating to sit in the dust or in a gutter or in a bed as the result of an accident. It might have been the accident of an illness or a serious injury or physical handicap; or the accident of what sex you happened to be; or the accident of the color of your skin; or your economic status, how much money your parents had; or the kind of education that you were able to get. Accidents of history, but they are the accidents of history that are turned, by the powers of this world, into the means of oppression.

Bartimaeus may have been down but he was not out. He cried out a cry of faith. And what a man of faith he was, this blind beggar sitting in the dust. It is when you are down, I mean really down, that it's hardest to believe. It's when everything is going against you, when accidents of history continually beat you down. You try to stand up and you get knocked down again. It's far easier to sit there and be quiet, to let all those voices win that continually say, "Oh, shut up, be quiet, we don't want to hear it any more." But Bartimaeus didn't keep quiet. He cried out. And he didn't whine and say, "O Jesus, help; I'm so miserable." Nor did he demand and get tough with Jesus and say, "All right, Jesus, I demand that you get over here and heal me; I have been done unto and you have got to do something about it." No. He called out a prayer, a prayer that has become a part of the eucharistic liturgy: "Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us." We should say his prayer as he said

it; not as a cry of penitence, beating our breasts, but as a cry of faith for deliverance – "Son of David, Jesus, have mercy on me."

Let me give you theologians a test: was Bartimaeus a conservative or a liberal? Think with me for a moment.

You would have to admit that he is a conservative. He obviously believes in the possibility of faith healing. He also believes in the power of prayer. And this clinches it – he calls out that wonderful name, that great and powerful name of *Jesus*. A good paraphrase of his cry would be that cry that can be heard at many churches in this city: "*Help me, Jesus.*" So Bartimaeus was a conservative.

But an equally good argument can be developed that he was a liberal. Bartimaeus was, after all, carrying on a non-violent direct action demonstration. He was engaged in a form of civil disobedience. He was actively advocating the needs of the blind. And, most important, notice that the first name that he called out is a political title, "son of David." Bartimaeus was involved in politics. Why, if the Romans had heard that, Jesus would have been in trouble. It was those kinds of cries that the chief priests cited as evidence in Jesus' trial before Pilate on that next Friday. Israel had hoped for generations for a "son of David" who would set them free from Gentile domination and reestablish the kingdom of David. Bartimaeus believed that Jesus was the Messiah. That's why he called him "son of David."

The cry of Bartimaeus can teach us something. Many of the divisions between conservatives and liberals in American Christianity must be transcended into a new synthesis. Christian social action without deeply rooted personal faith grounded in prayer, knowledge of the Scriptures, and regular worship will always be weak and short-lived. But a form of Christianity that seeks only to give individuals a personal experience of salvation is not Christianity. There are those who are saying that the churches had no business being involved in political and social issues in the sixties. But I say that nowhere in the Bible is there worship of a God who is only a personal God for individuals. Moses, the prophets, and Jesus were all involved in religious struggles that were profoundly political and affected the life of the nation of Israel. There is no dichotomy between religion and politics in the Bible. They are inextricably related. There are both individual and corporate aspects to the gospel. This seminary can forge a new unity between the various factions of American Christianity – conservatives and liberals, pentecostals and radicals. Look at your brothers and sisters in this community. They and those they represent are your primary allies in the struggle against the powers of evil in this age. The source of our unity can be heard in Bartimaeus's cry of faith.

Jesus stopped in the middle of the road and said, "Call him." And they said to Bartimaeus, "Take heart, get up, he's calling you." Well, he didn't stand up and stroll over to Jesus. He threw aside his cloak, jumped up, and came to Jesus. He didn't mess around; he got right in there. This was his chance.

Now how did Jesus hear him amidst all of the noise and distraction of his journey? Let me suggest that Jesus heard Bartimaeus's cry of faith because he had his ears finely tuned to hear the cries of the victims of the accidents of history. You might say that he kept his internal radio tuned to the PMBL network, that is, the station that broadcasts the cries of faith of the poor, the maimed, the blind, and the lame. But Jesus had to work to stay tuned to station PMBL because his disciples kept protecting him. The disciples often sought to keep people away from Jesus: mothers with children, followers of other rabbis, crazy types. Jesus had to work hard to keep from becoming insulated.

And graduates, you will have the same problem Jesus had. With a degree or a certificate goes status. And with status there are lots of good things. But there are also problems. People start to protect you. They say, "Well, she's awfully busy; she's got a

degree." Or, "He's pretty smart and I don't know whether he will talk to me or not." Or, "I might be embarrassed; he probably won't have time." And so on. And many ministers do not stay tuned as Jesus did to those airwaves where they will hear the cries of faith from those who are hurting, from those who have been the victims of the accidents of history. Now I don't want to step on anybody's toes, but I note that many ministers listen mainly to station RHPR; that is, the rich, the healthy, the powerful, and the respectable. But Jesus stayed tuned to the PMBL network and those who would minister in his name have to keep their ears tuned to Jesus' favorite station. That is what liberation theology at its best is all about.

Jesus asked Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" And Bartimaeus called him by his title because he respected him; "Rabboni, I want to see again." Bartimaeus didn't beat around the bush; he knew what he wanted.

And then Jesus did something very interesting. Rather, he didn't do something. He didn't lay hands on him or even touch him. He didn't put anything on his eyes or say any words of healing or exorcism. He didn't tell Bartimaeus *to do anything*. This is the only healing story like this. Can you see in your imagination how Jesus looked at him? And simply said, "Go, your faith has freed you." And immediately Bartimaeus could see again.

What had Jesus done? He had simply given permission to Bartimaeus's faith to become the power that set him free. Bartimaeus's cry of faith from the depths of his blindness liberated him from his affliction. Bartimaeus appeared to be weak, but by his faith in Jesus Christ he had the power of freedom in his own hands. And Jesus recognized the power in Bartimaeus's cry of faith and enabled that faith to go into action. And he could see again!

And what did he see? He saw that Jesus was the Messiah, that Jesus who was going up to Jerusalem to suffer and die was the Lord of heaven and earth, the chosen one of God.

Now the Church in America has been retreating from the period of social involvement in the sixties into private religion. And like Bartimaeus the Church does seem weak and powerless in comparison with the power of the government, the power of the commercial empires of the world, and especially the power of the combined armies of the world arming ever more powerfully for nuclear war. How do we feel by comparison? Weak. What is the power of the Church beside the powers of this world? It seems very small and insignificant.

But look at history through Bartimaeus's eyes. On Bartimaeus's commencement day, the power of Rome was overwhelming. A group of us have returned from a trip to the Holy Land and while we were there we saw the monuments of the Roman Empire. The most impressive was the wailing wall. At the time of the Zealot war, the Romans were driven out of Israel for a year, but then they returned and systematically reoccupied the land. They besieged Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple.

Titus, the Roman general, left standing only one part of the outer wall of the Temple area. He left it there as a sign for all to see the power of Rome, of what Rome could destroy. And it was only the outer wall around the Temple. It rises up about one hundred feet and the rocks are massive. The Romans destroyed everything else. Their message: do not resist the power of Rome. And the armies of Israel could not.

But let me tell you a story. When Jesus died he left a group of followers – eleven disciples, perhaps two hundred followers at the most. Jesus left them with words and sacraments. When compared with the power of the Romans, the stories and sacraments of the Church seem relatively insignificant. But they are not. Jesus gave his disciples the essential means for setting free the power of faith.

And look at what has happened since Bartimaeus's day. We are a community of Christians in a continent that was not even known at the time of Jesus, and are part of a community of Christians that now extends to every part of the earth. Over the past two

thousand years, the descendants of Bartimaeus have long since left Rome sitting in the dust. What did Rome amount to? Roughly three to four hundred years of power after the death of Jesus, and then Constantine gave in and became a Christian. Rome lost! Where is the power of Rome? Long dead, in the dust. Where is the power of the empires that have come and gone since then? Long dead. What remains of all the armies that have fought? Nothing, only the destruction that they have wrought. But the power of the gospel, the power of the story of Jesus, is now more powerful, touches more people's lives, than at any time in history.

Look at history through Bartimaeus's eyes. We have only begun to fight the battle of the Spirit. Look beyond our individual lives to the sweep of God's action in the life of the corporate community of the body of Christ and you, too, will see that the power of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ will triumph over all the powers of oppression and evil.

Well, we are at the end of the story. Bartimaeus didn't go off and celebrate. He didn't say, "Whew, this begging has been hard work. I am going to take some time off and take it easy." He could see again, and he followed Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. This day is not an ending; it is a beginning. The degree is your marching orders. You have been enlisted in the band of the disciples of Jesus.

We have not been playing school. You have not been going through exercises or jumping through hoops in order to justify our giving you some credentials. We have been working together so that we can all be more powerful ministers of the faith of Bartimaeus. Therefore, remember Bartimaeus and the power of his cry of faith, and walk along with him and with all those disciples of Jesus who have gone before us and with those who will come after us, and we will all sing together on that great day of final victory the words of the old spiritual: "Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we're free at last."