

October 24, 2021
Mark 10:46-52

Pentecost 22
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Overcoming Obstacles”

“Go, your faith has made you well.’ Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.”

“Sprung from cages on Highway 9, chrome-wheeled, fuel-injected, and stepping out over the line.”

The words of Bruce Springsteen’s iconic song “Born to Run” evoke memories of the years Susan and I lived along U.S. Highway 9 in Ocean County, New Jersey. Highway 9 is the major north-south route along the Jersey Shore, paralleling the Atlantic Ocean to the east and the Garden State Parkway to the west. It was a route that we travelled daily and relied upon for shopping, pastoral visits, and trips north to visit family and friends. Highway 9 was such a regular part of our everyday lives that we often took it for granted – until the day when a flash flood washed out a bridge over the Forked River that created an immediate and insurmountable obstacle. We never realized how dependent we were on that one bridge; when it was washed out, it soon became clear that there was no other route by which we could so easily cross that river. We needed to travel about 45 minutes out of our way to find another bridge that would get us to the north side of the river, which was not only inconvenient but could be dangerous for those who needed to cross to bridge to get to doctors’ offices or the hospital in Toms River. It was impossible to be “*stepping out over the line*” when there was an obstacle on that line that could not be crossed. There are times when we encounter unexpected obstacles that can have devastating consequences: a road closure, a downed tree that blocks our walking path to school or work, a health issue such as a broken leg or the flu, or a long-term illness or disability that can alter every aspect of our lives. Some obstacles may be temporary inconveniences or minor nuisances, while other obstacles can affect us in ways that are long-lasting and life changing.

Today’s Gospel lesson centers on a man in Jericho introduced by Mark as “*Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar*” (Mark 10:46). For Bartimaeus, his blindness presented many obstacles that were difficult to overcome, including his ability to get Jesus’ attention as our Lord entered the city. His blindness was not only an obstacle that prevented him from seeing the world as do persons with sight; it also prevented him from holding down a job, getting married and having a family, and

living as a member of his community. *“Although he is the ‘son of,’ men in his situation would not be able to form a family, work to sustain himself and his dependents, or fulfill some obligations proper to civic and religious life”* (Luis Menendez-Antuna). His blindness created obstacles that Bartimaeus could not overcome; he was reduced to begging at the side of the road and not disturbing those who could go about their daily lives free of such obstacles:

- “Bartimaeus is outside normal communal operations. His role as a blind man is to be barely seen and often not heard ... His quiet presence should remind pious community members of their obligation to give alms; he does not have a right to be obtrusive. He is allowed to beg but not to badger.” – Timothy Adkins-Jones.

The life of Bartimaeus had been defined by the obstacles that his blindness and society’s reaction to it has imposed upon him – until he heard that Jesus of Nazareth had come to Jericho. At this news, the blind man defied all of the obstacles and expectations that had oppressed him when *“he began to shout out and say, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’”* (10:47). This outburst surprises and offends the crowds who take exception to a blind man stepping out of his place; but when *“many sternly ordered him to be quiet ... he cried out even more loudly, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’”* (10:48). The crowd’s attempts to silence the beggar’s cries for help present another obstacle that Bartimaeus must overcome, an obstacle to the one who he believes can remove the obstacles that have defined his life. By continuing to resist the crowd’s attempts to silence his cries for help, Bartimaeus exhibits great faith in Jesus, who he addresses as “Son of David,” a title rarely used in the Gospels that harkens back both to the genealogy at the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel and to the Old Testament prophecies that will be fulfilled when Jesus fulfills his mission when he journey through Jericho ends in Jerusalem:

- “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD! We bless you from the house of the LORD.” – Psalm 118:26.
- “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” – Zechariah 9:9.

While Bartimaeus has had to endure obstacles that most people do not encounter, there are no obstacles that prevent him from seeing Jesus more clearly than almost anyone who has encountered our Lord up to this point in Mark’s Gospel. Bartimaeus had been told that “Jesus of Nazareth” was coming, a title that identifies Jesus only

by his hometown. But when Bartimaeus cries out he says “*Jesus, Son of David,*” identifying Jesus by his messianic designation (“*To you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.*” – Luke 2:11). So far in Mark, “*no one else has been able to perceive Jesus this well with so little data*” (Adkins-Jones).

While the crowd seeks to reimpose the obstacles around Bartimaeus, Jesus neither recognizes nor respects such barriers. Instead, he stops in his tracks and orders the crowd to “*call him here,*” after which the crowd tells Bartimaeus to “*take heart; get up, he is calling you*” (10:49). Bartimaeus springs up and comes to Jesus, in the process throwing off his cloak, which was not only an item of clothing but a garment that represented what little power he owns:

- “The cloak here is not only an aesthetic garment. For individuals living below poverty levels, the cloak is a piece that provides warmth in hostile weather conditions, a valuable piece that would allow them to sleep at night or to throw it in front of them to collect money. The garment was also a sign of status and power.” – Menendez-Antuna.

As Jesus’ disciples had left everything behind to follow him, Bartimaeus throws off what little he possesses so that he can come into the presence of the Lord. Jesus’ question to the blind man – “*What do you want me to do for you?*” (10:51) – echoes Jesus’ words to James and John when these audacious disciples demand that Jesus “*do for us whatever we ask of you*” (10:35). The difference is striking: “*the misguided request of the latter is here corrected by the enlightened desire of a blind man.*” (Lamar Williamson, Jr.). Bartimaeus’ request is simple and clear: “*My teacher, let me see again.*” We do not know if Bartimaeus had heard about Jesus’ healing of a blind man in Bethsaida (8:22-26), but he knows that the one who he had publicly confessed as the “Son of David” has come to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah: “*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy*” (Isaiah 35:5-6). Neither his blindness nor the presence of the crowds has placed an obstacle between Bartimaeus and the one he believes can restore his sight.

The faith of Bartimaeus is rewarded when Jesus says to him, “*Go, your faith has made you well*” (10:52) and he immediately regains his sight. But then Bartimaeus does something that may be interpreted as being disobedient to Jesus’ command; instead of going on his way, Bartimaeus “*followed [Jesus] on the way.*” Once healed, Bartimaeus joins the crowd that follows Jesus to Jerusalem. Such behaviour

reverses the image of the rich man who would not follow Jesus (*“When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”* - 10:22). Bartimaeus’ spontaneous enthusiasm provides a counterpoint to the fear, silence, and hesitation with which the Twelve followed Jesus up to Jerusalem (*“They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid.”* – 10:32). The story demonstrates *“the power Jesus has to awaken the faith of others.”* (Pheme Perkins). *“He regained his sight”* stands in close, parallel relationship to *“followed him on the way.”* The text is an invitation to persons who, though lost in the crowd, may be ready and eager for some vital contact with Jesus Christ:

- *“The healing of blind Bartimaeus is not simply a vivid story with a moral for Christians; it is a witness to Jesus Christ and a call to follow him ... Participation in the new covenant is open to the ‘house of Israel and house of Judah’ (Jeremiah 31:31), but also to all who, knowing their blindness, want to see; and to all who, seeing, follow Jesus on the way.”* – Williamson.

The restoration of sight to Bartimaeus is the last of Jesus’ healing miracles in Mark. After leaving Jericho, Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, greeted by crowds who *“spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields”* (11:8). Among them was the one who had thrown off his cloak so that he might be healed and become a follower of Jesus; he was the one who first proclaimed Jesus to be the one whose entry into the Holy City is celebrated with shouts of *“Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!”* (11:9-10). This is the beginning of the week in which Jesus will gather with his disciples for his last supper and the institution of the Lord’s Supper; his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane in which he prays *“Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want”* (14:36); his betrayal and arrest; his trial before Pontius Pilate; and his death on the Cross, after which *“the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom”* (15:38). The obstacles that had prevented Bartimaeus from coming into Jesus’ presence and becoming his disciple are now removed for all people; in the death and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour, all obstacles, barriers, and walls that would divide and separate us from God and from one another are removed, for such obstacles have no place in the kingdom of God that is inaugurated by the death and resurrection of Christ:

- *“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups*

into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it ... So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you are also built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.” – Ephesians 2:13-21,

Bartimaeus was able to overcome the obstacles that kept him separated and marginalized from others by the gift of faith that is “*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*” (Hebrews 11:1). This is the faith that is at the foundation of the church’s mission and purpose, the church which has been called through Holy Baptism, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and sent forth as “*a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.*” (1 Peter 2:9). The mission of the Church of Jesus Christ in every generation is to proclaim the good news of God’s liberating love which overcomes all obstacles and removes all barriers so that we might live in the assurance that “*neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” (Romans 8:38-39). As our Lord removed all obstacles and barriers that had separated us from God’s loving presence, our call as God’s people is to make certain that we do not place any obstacles or erect any barriers that would keep people from entering into God’s presence and receiving the fullness of God’s blessings. As a people who have been entrusted with the “*ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us*” (2 Corinthians 5:19), we must make certain that “*we are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found in our ministry*” (6:3). As we have been born anew through that “*amazing grace*” that has removed all blindness from our lives and redeemed us when we were lost without hope of finding our way back home (“*I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see*” – *Amazing Grace*), our mission is to remove all obstacles so that all people might know the love of God which is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord, the love that is ours from our God who “*so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life.*” (John 3:16).

The lives of the communities on both sides of the washed-out bridge on Highway 9 were disrupted for some time by the obstacle that suddenly divided them. There was a great deal of anguish and despair as people tried to figure out how to go about their lives that had been so transformed by something that they had taken for granted. They were able to overcome this obstacle only when the state highway department came in and erected a temporary bridge over the Forked River. While this bridge was not as easy to cross as the old bridge, it did once again give people access to both banks of the river and reminded everyone of how one simple obstacle can so disrupt so many lives. No one person could overcome this obstacle; it was through the intervention of others that communities were reunited and could once again resume their everyday lives.

The obstacles that separate us from God and from one another cannot be overcome by our own efforts; Martin Luther teaches us that *“I believe that by my own understanding or efforts I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him.”* (*Small Catechism*). As Bartimaeus was able to overcome the obstacles that had defined his life through the gift of faith in Jesus Christ, we are able to be reunited with our Lord and with one another solely through the grace that is ours in our Saviour’s death and resurrection, when through Holy Baptism we are bonded together with cords that cannot be broken. As Bartimaeus was given his sight so that he might follow Jesus, we are blessed with “grace-healed eyes” so that we might follow our Lord and look upon all persons through the eyes of the one who calls all people be freed from all obstacles so that they might be free to *“serve him without fear, holy and righteous in his sight all the days of our lives”* (Luke 1:74).

- “All of us in the church need ‘grace-healed eyes’ to see the potential in others for the same grace that God has so lavishly bestowed on us. ‘To love a person,’ said Dostoevsky, ‘means to see him as God intended him to be.’ – Philip Yancey.

Once the obstacles were removed, the people of that part of New Jersey were once again *“sprung from cages on Highway 9.”* Being liberated from the obstacles that keep us separated from the love of God and the fellowship of one another, may we walk in the footsteps of Bartimaeus, who reminds us that we are freed of the obstacles that stand in our way so that we might follow Jesus as his Church that has *“no mission but to serve in full obedience to our God; to care for all, without reserve, and spread his liberating word.”* (ELW Hymn 729).

Amen.