



# First United Church of Oak Park

## **The Power of Questions**

Mark 10: 46-52

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Jesus in the Gospels is possessed of remarkable powers. Healing the sick, and the multiplication of food, even being in two different places at once. But in addition to these well-known things, Jesus also has an uncanny ability to know things that he has no earthly way of knowing. Jesus knows about conversations had far away that he was not present for. He is able to describe in detail how future events will play out — think of the instructions that he gives the disciples before Palm Sunday detailing where to find the donkey he would ride. He even was able to know what people were thinking in their heart of hearts, down to the very words they had spoken only to themselves silently in their minds. Jesus has the uncanny ability to know things that he has no earthly way of knowing. That is clear in the Gospels.

So why, then, does Jesus ask so many questions? He already knows the answers, often more so than the one he is talking to, yet he teaches by asking questions. He argues with his detractors by asking questions, he prefaces so many of his miraculous healings by asking questions. He is not asking questions out of ignorance; he already knows the answer. So why ask so many questions?

Our reading today — popularly called the healing of blind Bartimaeus — is from the Gospel of Mark, and it contains just such a question. And in the Gospel of Mark, more so than any other Gospels, small easy-to-overlook details paint a remarkable picture. So let's attend to the details.

First, where is this happening? It is happening in Jericho, or more accurately, on the road leading out of Jericho and up to Jerusalem. And when is it happening? It is happening just before the events of Palm Sunday. In fact, as soon as Jesus and his followers complete their journey from Jericho to Jerusalem, that is when Jesus tells the disciples to go get him a donkey, with eerily accurate details.

Put another way, this story happens at the height of Jesus' fame and just before the moment of greatest tension and danger. The crowd that is following Jesus is

large, very large. And they were all talking excitedly and agitatedly about what was happening and where they were going. This was boisterous enough that people who just happened to be along the road were able to know who was coming, and what was going on. In my imagination it's like a gaggle of reporters all shouting questions at a press conference.

Yet in that loud chaos, Jesus hears one voice crying out — "Son of David, have mercy on me!" One voice among a multitude calling, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" And the Gospel of Mark says that Jesus stood still. Mark that, Jesus stops completely, stops the whole crowd who were anxiously going up to Jerusalem. At the moment of greatest tension when the journey to Jerusalem was momentous in the extreme, Jesus stood still and made all his disciples wait, saying, "Call him here."

Here we learn the man's name is Bartimaeus, and that he is blind and had been on the road because he was begging. Odd that this man's name would be recorded. Jesus heals many people whose names are not recorded. For the Gospel author to include the person's name, it points to the idea that the Gospel's original readers were expected to recognize this name. Remarkable, that the Gospel would say the early Christians would all know who this man was by name. Jesus says of Bartimaeus, call him here, and the Gospel says he leapt up, and threw off his cloak and made his way to Jesus.

Jesus was able to know all sorts of things that he had no earthly way of knowing. Yet anyone who watched Bartimaeus move through the crowd would be able to see that he moved as a blind man would move, and was dressed as a beggar would dress. And in a society where disability was a surefire condemnation to poverty, it does not take a psychic to know what Bartimaeus would be asking for.

Yet even so, Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks a question, but not because he is ignorant of the answer. So why? It is because it gives Bartimaeus a chance to speak for himself, to name what he is yearning for, and in doing so to reveal himself. And even though he speaks only a few words, it speaks volumes. He says, "My teacher, let me see again." "My teacher, let me see again." A world of pain is in that one word — again. Here is someone who had been able to see and lost his sight. Perhaps by sudden injury or illness, perhaps by a slow darkening of his eyes. One word, again, points to a story of heartbreak, one we would know nothing of but for Jesus' question.

And how he addresses Jesus, too: He calls Jesus "teacher." This is not simply an honorific; this shows that Bartimaeus already knew a great deal about Jesus. He

knew that people called him rabbi, and think to how he had called out to Jesus, calling him Son of David — a messianic title that shows that Bartimaeus is someone who had already decided in his heart that Jesus was the Messiah.

Calling him “my teacher” too shows that Bartimaeus considered himself a follower of Jesus, only having been prevented from being a disciple of Jesus because he was stuck on the side of the road in Jericho begging to survive on account of his blindness. “Son of David, have mercy on me. My teacher, let me see again.” Here was someone who believed in the mission of Jesus and who wanted to regain his sight in order to follow him.

And the final proof of that is that as soon as Jesus heals Bartimaeus, he joins in the procession heading to Jerusalem. He becomes a disciple, and even though he is the last disciple listed by name to join, he nevertheless became someone that the author of the Gospel would assume you knew the identity of.

All this — we can glean all of this because Jesus asks one question. Why, then, does Jesus ask so many questions? Jesus doesn’t ask questions because he is ignorant of the answers. He knows the truth, more so than the ones he is questioning. He asks questions because it allows people to reveal themselves, to tell their own stories, to frame their own heartbreaks, to name their own dreams. And in having been known, in having been listened to, those who follow Jesus are given dignity, and authority, and determination: the chance to make their name known abroad.

We who call ourselves Christians, we who would follow along his way and make Christ’s call our own, we should try to be like Jesus. But we may all be people who ask others questions, even when we think we know the answers. Especially when we think we know the answers.

Think of a person who is grieving a loved one — why ask them how they are? The answer is obvious; they are in deep grief. Why ask? Because it gives them a chance to name their own condition, to speak their loved one’s name in loving tones, to have the authority and dignity of speaking for themselves. Or think of a person deep in personal crisis who — like Job — have seen their life fall apart. Why ask them what they need, especially if providing it is beyond anyone’s power? Because it gives them the chance to name and number and count and rank their losses, to know that their story is important, that they are important even though they have lost the world.

We should be more like Jesus — a controversial thesis, I know. We should be people more known for questions than answers, more known for lifting others up than for glorifying ourselves. Even when we know the answers, especially when the answer is obvious, Christians ought to be people who love questions. May it be so.