

“Blind Bartimaeus”

Laurel Robinson

24 October 2021

It was fall of my senior year in high school, and my boyfriend Steve and I had just broken up. My father had arranged for me to be tutored in math with the expectation that I would bring up my SAT score, and I was taking a college-level correspondence course in French because the colleges I was applying to required three years of a foreign language, and my high school didn't offer a third year of French. I had my regular schoolwork and activities such as the city youth symphony and school newspaper. And then there were my weekly violin lessons with Mr. Minasian.

Samuel Minasian, concertmaster of the city symphony and faculty member of one of the local universities, whose conducting of the university's orchestra left him mopping the perspiration from his face and his hair flying around and looking just like Beethoven's. I'd had to audition for him before he'd take me as a student. My violin playing improved immediately under his teaching, but his intensity scared the hell out of me.

I wasn't sleeping much that fall, and woke up exhausted from nightmares when I did. I had unexplained stomach pains, I put on a lot of weight, and I looked haggard. I missed Steve, who was now dating other girls. He played the cello and we had a lot of classes together, so I had to see him every day at school as well as at music rehearsals, and it was painful. I felt pressured to get good grades, get into a good college, practice for my lessons with Mr. Minasian.

I didn't say anything to anyone about it. I'm a relatively private person, but I was also ashamed that I couldn't seem to manage this. I was the youngest of four children, the only one still living at home, and my parents had definite ideas about what parents were supposed to be and do. To put it more bluntly, they had pretty much always made decisions for me, and it didn't occur to me that I had any choice but to do what they said. I'm not blaming them; that's just the way it was in our family. Meanwhile, I didn't know why I was having so much trouble, but I felt like I needed to just keep my head down and work harder.

I'd been studying with Mr. Minasian for about six months when I was at my weekly lesson one afternoon and played a difficult passage I'd been working on. Sitting in his chair, puffing on an unfiltered Lucky Strike as usual, he said quietly, "I cannot accept that." I tensed up, and felt my pulse accelerate. He'd always had high standards, but usually he at least gave me instruction. And he'd never been unkind. I played the passage again. "I cannot accept that," he repeated.

Tears came to my eyes. And then suddenly I couldn't stop them, and within moments, I was sobbing. Several minutes later, I was still gasping for breath, and Mr. Minasian called Joanna, one of his top university students who lived nearby and whom I knew slightly. Obviously he didn't know what to do with me. Joanna came over to his office and she kindly walked me around the campus until I could talk again and it was time for my father to pick me up.

I didn't say a word about what had happened when I got in the car, but after dinner that evening, I shakily told my parents that I wanted to quit my lessons. I couldn't quit the math tutoring, I couldn't quit the French course; dropping the violin lessons was the only way I could think of to relieve the horrible pressure I felt. They were shocked and tried to talk me out of it, reminding me that they'd already paid for a full semester's worth of lessons, but I repeated that I wanted to stop. I was ashamed, and I was scared, but at last I had told the truth about how miserable I was, and in that telling, I felt a glimmer of both relief and affirmation. I had said out loud what I wanted and needed. In that moment I spoke up for myself and took a step toward healing. I can't say it happened overnight, but at least it was better.

I don't tell you this to complain about my parents, honest; they were truly good people with the best of intentions, and I was lucky to have them. (And there's always therapy.) I was also lucky to take those lessons from Mr. Minasian, the best music teacher I ever had. I tell you all this because it has made this story about Jesus and Bartimaeus more meaningful for me since I first read it several days ago.

It seems pretty simple: As Bonnie read to us, Jesus has been traveling toward Jerusalem with his disciples. People have joined them along the way, as word has spread about this man who teaches and performs miracles and talks about the radical and liberating news of God's love. By the time they're passing through Jericho, the number has grown to a large crowd. When Bartimaeus hears that Jesus is near, he shouts to him, "Jesus, have mercy!" It would be hard for him to just get up and try to find his way through the crowd and hope he runs into Jesus. Some people try to hush him, but Bartimaeus shouts even more loudly, "Jesus, have mercy on me!"

Jesus stops and says to the people around him, "Call that guy over here." So they say to Bartimaeus, "Hey, it's your lucky day. Jesus says to come on over." He throws down his cloak and goes to him, and Jesus says, "What do you want me to do for you?" Bartimaeus says, "I want to see again." Jesus says, "You're all set; your faith has made you well." And that's it: Bartimaeus' sight is restored, and he joins up with Jesus.

Now, please understand that I'm not assuming that something is "wrong" with people who are blind, or deaf, or have some other form of what we refer to as disabilities, and I'm not saying that they "need" to be changed. These days we have a fuller understanding of the fact that people with disabilities are whole just as they are, and may or may not wish to be different. At the same

time, we have a long way to go toward making ourselves and our world more inclusive and accessible.

But there's no question that life was difficult for blind people in Bartimaeus' time and culture. Conditions such as blindness were often believed to be signs of sinfulness or lack of faith, although Jesus corrects the disciples when they refer to that in a passage from the book of John. And people like Bartimaeus obviously had difficulty with the logistics of daily living, such as getting around and providing for their own basic needs. He has to depend on others to toss him a coin now and then. I'm guessing that he was often ignored, just like we often turn away from people asking for money as they sit on the sidewalk or stand in the intersection with a sign.

Bartimaeus doesn't have much power or status in the world, but his faith in Jesus gives him the courage to ask for help. He's heard about Jesus, and he knows that this is his big chance, his moment. He also knows the odds of his getting another opportunity like this are virtually nil. So he's going for it, even though people try to hush him. He's courageous, and he's persistent. And notice what Jesus does when Bartimaeus shouts his name: He stops and stands still. Despite all the noise and movement of the crowd around him, Jesus is tuned in to the voice of the person by the side of the road, the disempowered and marginalized.

I love that Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" We might think it's obvious what Bartimaeus wants: After all, the man's blind and has to beg by the side of the road. Why does Jesus even have to ask? But here's the thing: Jesus gives Bartimaeus a chance to speak for himself, to say his truth out loud, plain and simple. He respects Bartimaeus' basic human dignity and his right to use his own voice. How often do we assume we know what other people need or want, rather than asking them?

Also, though, there is power in telling the truth and in naming our vulnerabilities and what we need and want, just like when I finally told my parents I needed to quit my violin lessons with Mr. Minasian. Bringing them out into God's loving light is the first step toward healing any shame or pain or fear around them, and Jesus makes the space for Bartimaeus to do that. The minute Bartimaeus tells his truth, certain that Jesus can help him, he starts to break free from his limitations, in spite of the people in the crowd trying to hush him.

In last week's scripture passage, which comes just before this story, James and John tell Jesus they want something from him. Jesus asks them the same question he asks Bartimaeus: What do you want me to do for you? James and John say they want to sit on Jesus' right and left side, in his glory. They want to *be seen* right next to Jesus. Bartimaeus, on the other hand, wants to *see*. He understands more fully what Jesus is about than two of the disciples who have been with him for a while.

And earlier in this chapter of Mark, a man asks Jesus what he needs to do to gain eternal life. Jesus tells him to sell his possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow him. The man is disappointed and turns away. Yet Bartimaeus throws down his cloak as he goes to Jesus. A cloak was a valuable possession, and Bartimaeus almost surely used it to catch the coins people tossed to him. The fact that he ditches his cloak is a sign of his faith: He knows he's not going to need it anymore. It's also significant that he commits to following Jesus from here on out. He probably has no idea how difficult that's going to be—no one did—but I doubt he thinks it's going to be easy, either. Yet he takes the risk, because he knows that the way of Jesus points to a different way of seeing and being in the world, and he wants to be part of it.

Like Bartimaeus, we all want the chance to speak up for ourselves and be free of what holds us back. But we've all been in that crowd of naysayers at some time or another, too. We try to shut people down if we think they're distracting or they've gone off topic, or what they're saying isn't worth our time. Or at least we shut them down mentally, inwardly rolling our eyes and waiting impatiently for them to *finish* already while we think about what to have for supper. Perhaps we're embarrassed by their voices and their neediness. Can't they just suck it up for now? Must they be so public about it? Or maybe we like feeling that we're part of the "in" crowd, and get territorial about our groups or our charismatic teachers or people we admire. The folks who try to get Bartimaeus to quiet down may be feeling like there's already too much competition for Jesus' attention.

But Jesus does another interesting thing here. He doesn't scold them by saying, "No, *you* be quiet. The man is asking something of me. What's it to you?" Instead he says, "Call him over here." The same people who tried to hush Bartimaeus suddenly change their tune and encourage him: "Hey, he's calling you! It's your lucky day!" I wonder if they feel embarrassed or sheepish about how they treated him just a few moments ago. Or maybe they feel special for being asked to help. Jesus could just walk over to Bartimaeus, but he doesn't. He invites those same people who tried to hush him to participate more closely in what comes next. We don't know how they feel about being asked to enable the man they just tried to dismiss, but Jesus is giving them a chance to experience some learning and healing as well.

Friends, this story reminds us that God is tuned in and hears us calling, like Bartimaeus. We are assured that God invites us to name our needs and yearnings, and that our courage and vulnerability in doing so moves us closer to wholeness. And even when we're tempted to dismiss or shut down the voices of others, God gives us a chance to help and encourage them, thereby gently leading us to make room for everyone. God never stops inviting us to be transformed and healed. Thanks be to God. Amen.