

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman
Christ Church, Tarrytown, NY October 28, 2012
Text: Mark 10:46-52

Not long ago, I was in Manhattan attending an all-day alumni event at Union Theological Seminary. I ran into a friend there who had graduated with me and whom I hadn't seen for a long time. We were anxious to catch up with each other, and we kept starting conversations about what was going on in our lives. But we were constantly interrupted. Someone else we knew would come over to talk. A former professor would greet us. A workshop would begin. By 3 p.m., I felt, again, like I had when I was the mother of children under five years of age – it seemed as if I hadn't completed a sentence all day long.

As the event at Union was drawing to a close, and my friend, Lindsay, and I still hadn't been able to catch up with each other, we decided to walk to the subway together and take the train for three stops before I'd get off to catch a cross-town bus. As we walked south on Broadway, Lindsay was finally able to tell me about the book that she had just finished writing.

And then a man approached us – not someone we'd known in seminary. He was disheveled, kind of wild-eyed, and he had little regard for personal space. He stood right in front of us, said he knew we were caring people, and spoke loudly of his recent hardships and of his gift and love of singing.

All I could think about was how much I wanted to get away from this man. Lindsay and I had important things to talk about that we'd waited for all day long, and we didn't have much more time left together. She had a late afternoon appointment to keep in Brooklyn, and I was on my way to Lenox Hill Hospital to visit a neighbor before catching the train back to Croton. We both had a specific destination we were headed toward and a clear agenda for the journey. Impatient and annoyed, I interrupted the man in mid-sentence, handed him a \$5 bill, and we tried to walk around him.

But he would not be put off. He began to try to gather other passersby around us as he started to sing a hymn in a booming, off-key voice.

I was embarrassed – for him and for us – and I just wanted to get away, and on to the things that I considered to be of much higher priority than standing on the sidewalk listening to this man who seemed a little crazy.

When I read today's text from the Gospel of Mark early this week, I couldn't help but be struck by the similarities between the story of Bartimaeus and my encounter with the man at Broadway and 119th Street. These men were both marginalized members of society. They both had considerable needs. They were both very pushy and neither had anything to lose by insisting on making their needs known to people who they believed, for whatever reason, would care.

The difference between Mark's story and mine is that Jesus stopped and gave his undivided attention, with a heart full of compassion, to Bartimaeus. It wasn't as though Jesus didn't have any place in particular to go, or anything important to say to his disciples along the way. His remaining time with his followers was very limited as they journeyed together toward Jerusalem, toward what one commentator calls "... the most important world-saving, sin-defeating, new-making event in the history of the cosmos."

Jesus had something important to do. Yet, he stopped for Bartimaeus. And when he did, he didn't presume to know what Bartimaeus wanted of him. He respected him enough to ask, "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus listened to his reply. The desire of Bartimaeus' heart was to be able to see again. Through Jesus' healing love, Bartimaeus regained his sight.

If my life looked more like Jesus', I would have stopped at Broadway and 119th Street and given my full attention to the man in front of me. And with a heart full of compassion, I would have asked him what he wanted. I didn't, but he told me anyway. He wanted to sing for me, for Lindsay, and for the others walking by. He wanted to be heard; he wanted to be seen. We declined. We had the ability to give him what he wanted – what he asked for - and we said no, because we were too busy with more important things.

The miracle that we usually focus on when we hear this story of the blind beggar is Jesus enabling Bartimaeus to see again. I wonder if the miracle that's just as important, if not more so, is that of Bartimaeus being seen by Jesus. Jesus didn't overlook him. He engaged him, respected him, and cared about him. As followers of the way of Jesus, we're called to do the same.

Think of the number of opportunities that we're given every day to offer our loving presence and full attention to the person who is right in front of us, whether family member, friend, colleague, or stranger. Think of what it might mean to someone to be asked, "What do you need?" Think of the number of miracles that we have the privilege of participating in, if we're only paying attention.

We were in Ann Arbor yesterday, visiting our youngest son who just moved there. As he was showing us around the downtown area, a disheveled, wild-eyed man tried to get our attention. This time I stopped. Looking intentionally into his eyes, I asked him what he wanted. He said he wanted 50 cents for lunch. I gave it to him and looked into his eyes again before going on.

May we be people who, like Jesus, intentionally and lovingly offer the gift of being seen and heard to those whose paths cross ours – especially those who are most invisible and whose voices are so seldom heard. Amen.