

Same Question, Different Answer
 Mark 10:35-45
 October 25, 2009 J. S. O'Neill

Mark 10:46-52 *They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside.* ⁴⁷ *When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"* ⁴⁸ *Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"* ⁴⁹ *Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here."* *And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you."* ⁵⁰ *So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.* ⁵¹ *Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher,¹ let me see again."* ⁵² *Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.*

One day George Buttrick, professor and preacher to Harvard University, invited Archibald Macleish, poet-in-residence at Harvard, to speak at a morning chapel service. Macleish responded with a loud, emphatic, "No!" and hung up on Buttrick. A short time later, Macleish called back and apologized for sounding rude, but explained, "I just couldn't be such a hypocrite as to speak in chapel." And not long after that he phoned yet again and said, "All right," he said, "I'll do it. But, don't think I think Christianity has all the answers — but it does ask the right questions."

Those terms were fine by Buttrick and should be fine by us, as well. Faith, after all, is not a set of doctrinal statements that we may affirm in a creed but our personal wrestling with questions addressed to us by a voice not our own. Such questions about the meaning and purpose of our lives are never satisfied simply nor can they be defined by someone else. The beliefs of the church may be a map for us, but they are not the territory we must negotiate in life.

Faith is not a commodity that can be easily packaged and handed to someone. It is not a cure that can be gulped down like a pill, nor a fashion to be put on like a suit. It is certainly not a room with furniture covered in plastic where not a speck of dust is tolerated. Faith is often messy and untidy. Some days it fits and some days not so much. Some days the questions are loudest; other days the answers drown them out.

Does Christianity ask the right questions? Macleish believed so, even while certain that his own life didn't answer the questions in conventional ways. That was the reason for his initial refusal to speak. It would be hypocrisy, he said. It would give the wrong impression that he was comfortable with what he understood the answer Christianity gave.

He is like many of us, I suspect, who have an uncomfortable relationship with formal religion. It's a bit ironic: many stay away because they feel the church is a shrine of hypocrisy and they're above all that, others stay away because they feel their lives are such a mess they feel they wouldn't be accepted — maybe by God, or certainly by those imagined hypocrites already there.

Hypocrisy is always an issue, of course, but fortunately it's not a problem confined to the church. Unworthiness is certainly not an issue. If it were, I

would not be standing here before you, nor would any of us be present. If the test of faith is the quality of our lived answers to God's challenges, would any of us get a passing grade? Faith is the process of wrestling with the questions and in the process discovering hope. Look at scripture: it's not the folk who think they know all the answers, but the marred, scarred, and faulty who became the subjects of Jesus' healing grace.

Take Bartimaeus, the blind man. He was a beggar, the scripture story tells us, but we could have figured that one out by ourselves. Beggary would have been such an individual's only option – there was no insurance program to cover his disability, no fair employment laws giving him rights to work. On top of it all there was the dark suspicion that anyone suffering such an affliction must have done something grossly immoral to deserve it. Sympathy was hard to come by in that day, and there was precious little coming from Jesus' disciples that day, as they acted like some rock star's bodyguards shoving the man aside, telling him to shut up, and keeping him in the roadside ditch away from Jesus.

Once again the disciples are the artless foils to Jesus' graciousness. Once again they show they have all the intelligence and imagination of toads. They just don't get it. Jesus' daily bread is blind beggars, infirm women, afflicted lepers, despised Samaritans, the poor and impoverished, the unrighteous and condemned, the lame and ill and all those people the disciples wanted to avoid. It was in last week's lectionary episode, you remember – indeed, the story the gospel of Mark tells immediately previous to this one about Bartimaeus – that James and John approached Jesus with a request. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus said, and they laid out their requests to be five-star generals in Jesus' new revolutionary government. "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory," they had said. [Mark 10:37]

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked James and John, and just sixteen verses later here is Jesus asking that blind beggar the exact same question. "Master," Bartimaeus answers, "let me receive my sight." The question is the same. The respective answers could hardly be in greater contrast. The first is about James and John living in the spotlight; the second is about the light coming into Bartimaeus. In the first case Jesus tells the guys they don't know what they are asking; in the second, the man knows exactly what he is asking for and so there is healing. Not to take anything away from Jesus, but we all know, don't we, how often in life it is easier it is to heal from a physical injury than a spiritual one. Bartimaeus was filled with light; James and John still groped in the dark.

The disciples craved easy answers; they wanted smooth, uncomplicated access to the mysteries of faith. They didn't, as Jesus told them, know what they were asking. Can you suffer like I will suffer, he asked them? Can you go to the cross and remain faithful unto death, he wondered? And though tradition has it that James and John would both die martyrs' deaths, when they, with the glib brightness of youth, chirped, "Sure we can!" Jesus must have rolled his eyes and muttered, "Give me strength!"

They had not been tested. They had not lived the questions. After all this time with him, they still had not gotten right the mission Jesus was about. Their whole focus was upon glory and triumph and being princes in some never-never land. They hadn't yet caught on that they had been called to be disciples, men without honor, servants,

not masters.

Are you able to pay the price, Jesus asked? "Here are some of the costs," Halford Lucckock writes, " — an escape from the prison of self, a childlike trust in God, a losing of self in a cause bigger than self, so that life does not spin around either your aches and pains or your gratifications, but finds a new center."

We, too, long for answers. Do we prefer those that comfort with easy assurance, promise riches and glory and kind seasons without end? Do we know what we ask? God's answers more often carry us more deeply into struggle, more urgently into confrontation with injustice than lift us safely above the fray. How often do we need to be reminded that in scripture it is not the smug and confident and cocksure that receives Jesus' healing hand, but those who have nowhere else to go and no one else to turn to.

Let's make the question of the day our question: what do we want Jesus to do for us? Like Jesus' own disciples who were close to his heart and working daily alongside him, do we want to be seen or do we, like Bartimaeus, want to see? It is our need that draws Christ close to us, our deficits that claim God's mercy, not our power-plays, not our pretense of perfection, not our self-congratulatory goodness. If that is all we can come to Jesus with, we will inevitably go away empty-handed, for we will not have known what we asked for, and will not understand the answer we have been given.

"What do you want me to do for you?" What would you ask for as a disciple without pretense, without honor, without designs upon glory? The possible answers narrow down. If not honor, then possibly understanding; if not glory, then, just possibly, the privilege of serving in him; if not the glitter and sparkle of power, then just possibly a light to see by?

Poet Miguel de Unanumo told the story of Don Immanuel, a priest in a small Spanish village. He is adored by all the people for his piety and spiritual strength. There is power and majesty in the way he celebrates the Mass. To the same extent there is kindness and mercy in the ways he serves his people — helping with their farm chores, ministering to them in their illnesses, burying their dead, baptizing their children, teaching them the faith.

The problem is long ago his faith left him. He no longer believes. Life has robbed him of his former certainty; suffering has confused his belief. Yet, the people need him, so he continues in his role, a pretense, a hypocrisy in one sense, yet profoundly helpful in another. Their need is greater than his own turmoil. Who perceives the situation correctly: Don Immanuel who feels that his faith is a sham, or the people who call him a saint?

Could Don Immanuel be wrong? Not about his early faith having left him, but that a better, more noble, more realistic faith has supplanted it, one less focused upon the glory of a role and more upon its servanthood? Does he pray for faith; does he know what he's asking? Could it be that his loyalty to his people is that very divine gift, a faith he perhaps cannot recognize but is precisely what he, and they, need?

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks. Our answer is not just an expression of faith, it is faith itself. What do we want, after all? What do we want? Do we want God to fit our plans or do we want to fit God's? Do we want to pose the questions, or will we submit to God's questioning? Will we set the parameters of life or

will we allow God to use us as is fitting for that strange, unfulfilled kingdom God seeks to establish in our midst. What do we want? Are we able to want for us what God wants for us?

Presbyterian minister and writer Eugene Peterson says. "The great weakness of American spirituality is that it is all about us: fulfilling our potential, getting the blessings of God, expanding our influence, finding our gifts, getting a handle on principles by which we can get an edge over the competition. The more there is of us, the less there is of God."

"We cannot participate in God's work but then insist on doing it in our own way. We cannot participate in the building of God's kingdom but then use the devil's tools and nails. Christ is the way as well as the truth and the life. When we don't do it his way, we mess up the truth and we miss out on the life."