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I'm currently teaching a class on UCC history and polity, and part of what we talk about in the class is how the UCC just can't be defined theologically, because we are always open to new perspectives. And here's an illustration of that. Several years ago, an attempt was made to initiate church-wide theological discussion, and they started with something that they thought everyone would agree on: we are Christ-centered. Makes sense, right? We're Christian, so we're centered on Christ. Except immediately some people challenged this. It wasn't the Jesus part they challenged, but the geography of it. "Jesus," they said, "never placed himself in the center. He always placed himself in the margins." And that opened up a whole different conversation, one that not only proved to be fascinating, but that also began to influence the very language that the national church started to use. So theological discussion in the UCC never ends up with a neat and tidy doctrine that you can put into some kind of creed. It has a tendency to explode and be really messy – but I would say it's also fascinating and insightful. And that issue of the margins comes into play in our story from Mark's gospel.

But before we get into it, one other piece about margins. Tomorrow night I'm going to be starting a five-week course on how to talk about race, with the SoL Center. (It's not too late to sign up!) And a big part of the focus will be about institutional racism rather than personal prejudice. The way our society is set up privileges some groups of people and oppresses, or disenfranchises, or *marginalizes* others. So that's been very much on my mind lately, and when I read the story of Bartimaeus, the whole entire story seemed to perfectly illustrate that exact thing. As I've been saying over the last couple of weeks, we always see the Bible through an interpretive lens, and that's the lens I looked through to read this story. It can be read other ways, but here's what I saw on this reading.

First, let's note that this is the last story in Mark before Jesus enters into Jerusalem and starts Holy Week. Up until now, Jesus has been traveling all around northern Judea and the surrounding countryside – literally, the margins of his country. Now he will be entering the center, Jerusalem, and in doing so he approaches his own death. So think about that! Also, in the tenth chapter Jesus has been trying to explain what's coming up to his disciples, but they keep not getting the message, and this whole sequence of stories is framed by two tales of blind men being healed. The first story, which occurred in chapter eight, was a partial healing. One of my favorite stories, where Jesus heals the man, but the man says, "I see people, but they look like walking trees," and Jesus has to heal him again to get it right. This symbolizes the fact that the disciples only see part of the truth. Then we get this last story with Bartimaeus, who despite his blindness sees things more clearly than anyone else in Mark's gospel. But more on that in a minute.

"Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside." A word about his name: "Bar" is a prefix meaning "son of", and "Timaeus" means honor or respect of value. So the name here means something like honorable son or worthy son. Yet he is a blind beggar. To be blind in those days was a handicap that left one destitute, without money or value or much honor, to be honest. The lowest of the low. And note the geography: he's sitting by the roadside. In other words, he's on the margins. You've seen it before: people who are begging are sitting near the action, but off to the side. Not obstructing the flow of traffic, but near enough where they can stick their cup out. You know they're there, but it's easy enough to ignore them if you want. We tolerate them being there, *so long as they know their place*.

This is what privilege means. It means we get to walk wherever we want. It means we get to define where the non-privileged get to go and don't get to go. From the American South to South Africa, when black people were coming up to white people on the sidewalk, the black people had to *step off the sidewalk to make room*. Marginalized. Where do people get to walk? What part of the bus are they allowed to ride in? What neighborhoods do they live in? The ghetto – a word that literally means the storage area of a foundry, because that happens to be the neighborhood in Venice where it was decreed all Jews had to live. It has come to mean a poor, overcrowded, rundown area of town to which people are marginalized. It's okay for them to live among us, so long as they keep their place, a place we the privileged define for them. This is Bartimaeus, who he is – a worthy and honorable son, and whom society has allowed him to be – a poor beggar restricted to the side of the road.

“When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’” Now, the gospel of Mark has this whole theme called the Messianic Secret, which means that nobody gets it. Nobody recognizes who Jesus really is or what he's really about. So it's a huge deal that in this gospel the one and only person who ever calls Jesus “the son of David” is Bartimaeus. And remember, he says this just as Jesus is about to enter into Jerusalem with all the excitement and drama of Palm Sunday. The crowds have all been wowed by Jesus' teaching and especially his miracles, but still they never quite understand who he is. But Bartimaeus, marginalized by society, physically blind, he sees and understands something that no one else gets.

He calls Jesus “the son of David.” That's as good as calling him the Messiah. In the Old Testament, the two terms are interchangeable. The Messiah, the spiritual son of the great King David, is the one who will liberate us, set us free, restore us to glory as the chosen people of God. Not just an earthly kingdom but a spiritual nation, one defined by God's justice and compassion. We think of the passage from Isaiah that Jesus quotes at the beginning of his ministry, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, and release for the oppressed.” That's not a God of the center. That's a God of the margins. A God who isn't about shoring up the privileges of the status quo, but of lifting up those whom society has pushed down. This is what marginalized Bartimaeus gets, that Jesus is here for *him* and for others like him. He knows this and shouts it out loud for everyone to hear. But what happens?

“Many sternly ordered him to be quiet.” It wasn't just that he was making too much noise, but also that he was making himself heard at all. He was violating the unspoken rule, that he's supposed to sit quietly by the road and wait for people to deign to notice him. He's not supposed to draw attention to himself, and especially not draw the attention of someone powerful and magical like Jesus. Jesus should be delivering his goods to those of us in the center, the establishment, the privileged (though we don't like to think of ourselves that way.) He can give his leftovers to the beggars at the side, but only after he's fed us first! Bartimaeus has no right to ask or demand anything. He needs to stay in his place, quiet and unnoticed.

But “Jesus stood still and said, ‘Call him here.’” Now this is interesting. It does not surprise us that Jesus would hear Bartimaeus and respond to him. But with my particular lens on, looking at marginalization, it was interesting to me that Jesus doesn't address Bartimaeus directly. Instead he appeals to the crowd around him, the very crowd that had been shushing Bartimaeus. What's up with that? Is it that this blind man needed help getting to Jesus? Well, as we shall soon see, Bartimaeus needs no seeing-eye dog. Rather, what struck me is that Jesus is inviting the privileged crowd to change their role. He's inviting them to take part in the action. He's inviting them to reach out to the margins and use their power to lift up, not to push down. Because you see, Bartimaeus is not the only one who is enslaved by this system of oppression. The privileged group is enslaved too.

So it is that the crowd now turns to Bartimaeus and warmly says, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you!” Oh, so very nice and sweet of them, considering that two sentences ago they were telling Bartimaeus to keep his trap shut. The condescension here is rather jarring. If you read it carefully, you can see how even in their words they’re still marginalizing Bartimaeus by focusing on Jesus as the agent of action. “He is calling you” not, “You’ve called him and he heard!” The crowd is like the liberal white people, who kinda get it, but not all the way. Bless them! Jesus loves even them, too.

Well, Bartimaeus needs no condescension. “Throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.” Pretty spry for a blind guy! The sureness of his actions indicates that he knows exactly what it is he needs. There’s no hesitation at all. Indeed, that action of throwing off his cloak, his outer garment. That is his shield against the elements, his blanket, his *home* on the streets. It’s the same garment that Jesus mentions in the Sermon on the Mount, “If someone asks for your cloak, give your shirt as well.” In Old Testament law, if someone gives you their cloak as a guarantee on a loan, you have to return that cloak to them at night time so they will have something warm to sleep in. That’s how important the cloak is, and Bartimaeus just tosses it aside. His guarantee, his protection, his shelter. Tosses aside worldly possessions, tosses aside worldly assurances, in order to run after Jesus. Compare that to the rich young man whom Jesus encounters earlier in this very chapter and who couldn’t sell all he had and give it away in order to follow Jesus. Bartimaeus tosses aside the equivalent of his wealth.

“And Jesus said to him. ‘What do you want me to do for you?’” Now at first reading, this might sound like charity. Jesus has the goods and he’s going to see what’s in his pocket for this man. Except that this is the exact same question that Jesus asked James and John right before this very story. They told Jesus they wanted him to do whatever they asked, and he said, “What do you want me to do for you?” And they wanted to have seats of honor when he comes into his glory. Seats of privilege, seats at the center of power as they perceived it. In fact, it’s interesting to note that they don’t ask for power for themselves. Rather, they ask to be near Jesus, the one they perceive as being powerful.

Recall a sermon I preached a while ago, about how Jesus was always giving his power away to anyone who asked for it. He wasn’t about using his own power on behalf of others, but about giving that power away for us to use in the service of others. As Jesus says in John’s gospel, “You will do even greater things than I have done.” And this power is ours if we simply ask for it. Yet James and John do not ask for it. Rather, they want to be near the guy who has all the magic. They kinda get it, but not quite all the way.

Also, considering the condescension of the crowd, it’s also interesting to note that Jesus doesn’t just assume he knows what this blind man wants. He doesn’t just assume the man wants his sight restored. This is another definition of privilege: that we think we know what’s best for the marginalized people. How many charitable acts are founded on such condescension! But Jesus doesn’t make any assumptions. He asks Bartimaeus what he wants. He hands over that power to him. He lets Bartimaeus choose his own fate.

And Bartimaeus knows exactly what he wants. He knows perfectly what he needs. He absolutely, totally gets it. This is the Son of David, the one who comes to the margins to set people free. So he doesn’t even hesitate when he says, “Teacher, let me see again.” Give me power. Give me autonomy. Give me the ability to fend for myself in the world, to define myself and not accept the definitions others foist off on me. I am a Worthy Son, an Honorable Son, give me that dignity which is my birthright as a child of God. This is not just a story of healing, but one of empowerment, of having the

ability to work for a living and not beg, to determine your own fate and not just accept what the powerful are willing to put into your cup. And still more, of being restored to full membership in the community of God.

Of course Jesus answers, “Go, your faith has made you well.” As always, he recognizes the inherent power of this man whom society has relegated to the margins. Really, when you think about it, Jesus doesn’t set us free. We set ourselves free. All he does is give us the power to free ourselves. It’s ours for the asking.

But recall that other part: he gives us power so that we may serve others. So it is that as soon as Bartimaeus’ sight is restored, he follows Jesus on his way. And Jesus’ way, as I noted earlier, is toward Jerusalem, toward the center, toward his death and ultimately triumph. It will take the resurrection before Jesus’ own followers finally get it. But Bartimaeus, this marginalized man, he gets it before Jesus even sets foot in Jerusalem.

Questions for us to consider as we read this story: Where are we? Are we in the center of action, or are we on the margins? Who tells us to be quiet, and who do we in turn try to shut up? Are we blinded by our position at the center of society? Or are there things we are able to see more clearly because we are on the margins? Do we want to be near the center of power, or do we want to have that power ourselves? And once we have that power, do we use it for our own ends or do we use it to serve others?

Are we willing to follow Jesus? Not only to the margins, but also to the center of violence and death?