

How much does it cost to sit on the side of the road? A few weeks ago the *Globe* ran an article about “The most ticketed [cars] in Boston.”<sup>1</sup> Turns out, over the past 5 years the city has issued about 7 million parking tickets. And no surprise, most of them go to commercial vehicles. UPS (Big Brown) “owns more than half of the 50 most frequently ticketed vehicles in Boston... [They’ve] spent well over \$1 million” in less than 5 yrs. alone. But, really, what else can they do? According to UPS, “It is [simply] a cost of doing business... It’s part of what UPS does to move commerce.” If you’re going to deliver packages in big brown trucks, you don’t really have a choice.

But plenty of others do. Believe it or not, the most ticketed car in Boston is a Honda Accord that belongs to a Malden woman who parks in the Financial District every week. Over the past 5 years, she’s racked up “727 tickets... mostly for parking at an expired meter.” The cost of all those tickets is about \$19k, which sounds pretty expensive - until you compare it with the alternative. Because when you compare the “cost of leasing a parking space ... over the same period [for] roughly \$30,000” - all of a sudden those tickets sound pretty cheap. That’s just how much it costs to sit on the side of the road.

From this morning’s Gospel: *They came to Jericho. As [Jesus] and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2015/10/02/meet-most-ticketed-drivers-boston-paying-fines-annually/R5n77mLyC7WPWD5wexIeAP/story.html>

*beggar, was sitting on 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!" (Mark 10.46-47).*

How much does it cost to sit on the side of the road? That's the question for Bartimaeus in today's Gospel. At the beginning of the story he doesn't really have a choice. What else is he going to do? If you're blind in the ancient world and you can't earn your keep, sitting on the side of the road is just the cost of doing business. And believe me, it was business.

He was there for a reason. Specifically, for Bartimaeus, sitting on the side of the road was the cost of receiving mercy. It's the cost of mercy, where mercy is less of a feeling and more of an action.<sup>2</sup> Where mercy looks like this morning's Psalm: *I sought the LORD, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears (34:4). That's mercy. This poor soul cried, and was heard by the LORD, and was saved from every trouble (34.6). That's mercy.*

For most of Israel's history, mercy is what all the people sought from God. Their deliverance from exile & slavery? That's mercy. Their gift of a Promised Land? Mercy. Their return to the land and rebuilding of the Temple? That's mercy. In fact, mercy was so central to Israel's relationship with God that the Ark of the Covenant, the gold box that held the terms of their life before God, God's own revelation of himself; the Ark of the Covenant had a pure slab of gold for the top

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<sup>2</sup> "MERCY, MERCIFUL ," *NIDB*.

and it was called *The Seat of Mercy* (Exo. 25:17-22). Because that's where God spoke to the people and made himself known.

And in that regard Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, was no different than anyone else. Just like any other Israelite, he was after God's mercy. But for Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, sitting on the side of the road was the cost of that mercy. It was the cost of getting whatever he could to simply feed himself and survive.

For Bartimaeus, the cost of mercy - of sitting on the side of the road - included at least three things. First, the cost of mercy meant that he had to *expose* himself. He was out in the open, vulnerable for the world to see. And even though blind beggars weren't particularly scorned in the ancient world, there was definitely a cost. He's blind. He's helpless. Parking tickets sound pretty tame when you compare it to the vulnerability of a blind man sitting on the side of the road. Anyone could take advantage of the guy & leave him there to die.

To make matters worse, if the cost of getting mercy was sitting on the side of the road, well of course then you're going to look for the busiest road you can find to get the biggest bang for your buck. It's exactly what Bartimaeus did. Jericho was a busy road, and he was sitting there at the busiest time of all: Passover

The entire nation of Israel is marching to Jerusalem. And Jericho is the last stop on the way. To this day, it's still known as "the gateway to Jerusalem." It's about 15 miles or a day's walk from Jericho to Jerusalem. By nightfall, Jesus and the crowd would all be inside the boundaries of the great city; the City of King

David. It was just one day away, but admittedly it was a brutal day. Because there's a lot of wilderness between Jericho and Jerusalem. The ground is dry & jagged; the weather is hot. And it also happens to be one of lowest places on planet Earth.

Jericho sits about 1,000 feet *below* sea level just a stone's throw from the Dead Sea. Jerusalem is about 2,500 feet *above* sea level so the pilgrims' final march to the City of King David was a hot, jagged, and brutal 3,500 ft. uphill climb. Just the kind of situation to make people linger in Jericho until they're good & ready; until they've got enough fuel & supplies to make their way.

Bartimaeus exposes himself to all that. He makes himself vulnerable to a rowdy, hot, cantankerous crowd. It's the first cost of sitting on the side of the road.

The second cost to Bartimaeus is that he had to *extend* himself to meet Jesus. It wasn't enough to just sit there all exposed & vulnerable because Jesus, like the rest of the crowd, apparently just passed him by. Don't miss that detail. If you were writing this story to paint a flattering portrait of Jesus you would have had him stop first and give the blind guy some money. You would have had Jesus stop, and then use that compassionate setting for Bartimaeus to ask the question. But it doesn't work that way. The Gospel is more concerned in showing us that God is on the move; Jesus is alive and active in the world. But if we're not paying attention - and willing to extend ourselves - then apparently there's every chance that Jesus - like he does with Bartimaeus - will simply pass us by.

We see that kind of thing all over the place in the Gospels. Sometimes, Jesus

stumbles into a needy situation. There's a great story in Luke's Gospel (ch.7) where Jesus & the disciples are trundling along the countryside and they enter a village - and run right into a funeral procession; a widow burying her son. And Jesus stops in his tracks, shows compassion, and raises that son to new life. We have a couple of stories like that but most of them work the other way around.

Most of the healing stories are about people going out of their way, extending themselves and going to great lengths just to get near Jesus. They're making holes in rooftops to lower paralytics, they're fighting through a crowd to touch even the fringe of his cloak. They're chasing him down when they see him get into a boat and running on land to meet him when he arrives on the other side. No wonder we hear that Jesus is walking on the sea one night and when he sees the disciples rowing their boat, "he desired to pass them by," (Mk. 6). Everyone wants a piece of this guy.

Bartimaeus is in the same situation as everyone else. If he's going to meet Jesus, if he's going to receive mercy, extending himself is part of the cost of doing business. And so he does. *When he heard that it was Jesus, he began to shout and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"* (Mk. 10.47-49).

How much does it cost to sit on the side of the road? It means first that Bartimaeus has to expose himself socially & physically. It means second that he

has to extend himself by crying out twice, even louder the 2nd time than the 1st.

And then, finally (the pattern is going to repeat itself), because he has to expose himself again. But this time, it happens at a different level. The first time, he begins by superficially exposing himself. The second time, he ends by exposing his heart.

And by doing that, the Gospel is setting us up to see Bartimaeus as the model disciple for anyone; the model disciple who gives up everything to follow Jesus on the way. Remember what's happened before this. This is our 4th week in the same chapter of Mark's Gospel. It began when Jesus told his followers that no one would enter God's Kingdom unless they learned to enter like helpless child (10.15). After that we heard a story about a rich young man who wanted to follow Jesus - but went away sad because he had many possessions (10.17-31). Last week we heard about two brothers who were following Jesus, but they were arguing about which one was going to receive the most power (10.35-45).

This week, finally at the end, we see Bartimaeus, the blind man beggar; "throwing off his cloak" (10.50) - likely his only possession, and also the place where he probably stored his money. If you're a blind man in a crowd, good luck finding that again. We see him throwing off everything and racing to Jesus. "He is doing completely what the rich man could not bring himself to do - casting aside everything he possesses to come to Jesus."<sup>3</sup> The Rich man was unwilling to give up his possession, Bartimaeus throws away his only possession. The Sons of

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<sup>3</sup> Placher, *Belief Theological Commentary: Mark*. p.155

Thunder, James & John, asked for power, Bartimaeus asks for mercy.<sup>4</sup> “In sum, after a whole series of episodes in which the [disciples & the crowd] do not get it, here, just before Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, is someone who [finally] gets everything right. He recognizes Jesus as the Messiah, gives up everything, asks only for his sight, and follows Jesus on the way.”<sup>5</sup>

How much does it cost to sit on the side of the road? That's the question for us today. At the beginning of the story Bartimaeus may not have a choice. But plenty of others do: the rich young man, the disciples, and most of us too. The Gospel is inviting us to see that whoever we are, the cost of following Jesus - and receiving God's mercy - is always the same. Divine mercy always drives us to expose ourselves in places of vulnerability, always compels us to extend ourselves in a living relationship with God & others, it always invites us to express the needs, the desires, the wounds of our heart. It sounds like a lot. It sounds costly. And maybe it is, until you compare it with the alternative. Because if we compare the cost of divine mercy with the alternative of life without mercy, then all of a sudden, following Jesus sounds pretty cheap. *Amen.*

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<sup>4</sup> cf. Witherington, *Socio Rhetorical Commentary on Mark*

<sup>5</sup> Placher, *Belief Theological Commentary: Mark*. p.155