

How much does it cost to sit on the side of the road? In Boston, the cost is more expensive than it used to be. This summer the cost of parking tickets went up to pay for infrastructure and to bring Boston more “in line” with other cities.¹ The price for overstaying a meter is now \$40 instead of \$25. Parking without a resident sticker is up to \$60 from \$40. Most of impressive of all, parking in a loading zone will now set you back \$90 nearly doubling the previous cost of \$55.

Those prices can add up if you spend a lot of time in the city. A few years ago, even before these new prices kicked in, the *Globe* ran an article about “The most ticketed [cars] in Boston.”² Believe it or not, the winner didn’t belong to UPS or FedEx. It was a Honda Accord that belonged to a Malden woman who parked in the Financial District. Over 5 years, she racked up 727 tickets, almost 150 tickets per year, “mostly for parking at an expired meter.” The cost of all those tickets was about \$18k in the old prices. It sounds really 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 like a pretty good deal. If you live or work in a city like Boston ***it’s just the cost of siting on the side of the road.***

From today’s Gospel: *They came to Jericho. As [Jesus] and his disciples*

¹ <https://www.necn.com/news/new-england/Increased-Fines-for-Boston-Parking-Violations-Begins-Monday-487075241.html>

² <http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2015/10/02/meet-most-ticketed-drivers-boston-paying-fines-annually/R5n77mLyC7WPWD5wexIeAP/story.html>

and a large crowd were leaving, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind 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 have much choice. 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, and here it is. For Bartimaeus, **sitting on the side of the road was the cost of receiving mercy.** Bartimaeus was in the mercy business. He was on the receiving end of other people's mercy, where mercy is less of a feeling and more of an action.³ 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 the entire nation sought from the LORD.** Their deliverance from exile & slavery? That's mercy. Their gift of a Promised Land? Mercy. Their return to the land after exile and rebuilding the

³ "MERCY, MERCIFUL ," *NIDB.*

Temple? You guessed it: mercy. 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 with God; the Ark of the Covenant had a pure slab of gold for the cover 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.

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

The cost of mercy included at least three things for Bartimaeus. **First, it meant he had to *expose himself*.** He was a blind man out in the open, vulnerable. 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 person exposed on the side of the road. Anyone could take advantage of him & leave him for dead.

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

At Passover the entire nation of Israel is marching to Jerusalem. And Jericho is the last stop on the way. Jericho is still known as “the gateway to Jerusalem”; just one day’s walk to the great City of King David. But it’s a brutal walk. Jericho sits about 1,000 feet *below* sea level just a stone’s throw from the lowest place on earth. Jerusalem is about 2,500 feet *above* sea level. So the final march to the City of David was a hot, jagged 3,500 ft. uphill climb. Just the kind of situation to make pilgrims linger in Jericho until they’re good & ready; until they’ve got enough food, supplies, and companions to make their way.

Bartimaeus exposes himself and makes himself vulnerable to a rowdy, hot, cantankerous crowd. That’s the first cost of sitting on the side of the road.

The second cost to Bartimaeus is that he had to *extend* himself. It wasn’t enough to just sit there because Jesus, just like everyone else, apparently passed him by. Don’t miss that detail. If you were writing this story to paint a flattering picture of Jesus you’d have him stop first, and then use a compassionate setting for Bartimaeus to ask his question. But the Gospel is interested in showing us that God is already on the move; Jesus is active in the world. And if we’re distracted, or unwilling to extend ourselves, then apparently there’s every chance that Jesus may pass us by.

We see that pattern all over the place in the Gospels. Sometimes Jesus stumbles into a needy situation, like that great story in Luke (ch.7) where he enters

a village with his disciples – and they run right into a funeral procession; a widow burying her son. The procession stops Jesus in his tracks and in that moment of compassion he raises her son to new life. We have a couple stories like that but most of them work the other way.

Most of the healing stories are about people extending themselves just to get near Jesus. They're making holes in **rooftops** to lower paralytics, they're fighting through **crowds** to touch even the fringe of his cloak. They're **chasing** after him when he gets in a boat and running to meet him when he arrives on the shore. No wonder we hear that one night when Jesus is walking on the sea he sees the disciples rowing their boat and, "he desired to pass them by," (Mk. 6). He must be exhausted. Everyone wants a piece of this guy.

Bartimaeus is in the same boat as everyone else. If he's going to receive mercy from Jesus, extending himself is the cost. 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? First, Bartimaeus has to *expose* himself. Second, he has to *extend* himself. And finally the pattern repeats, because the last thing he has to do is expose himself again. In the beginning, he exposed himself physically & socially At the end, he has to expose

something more. He has to expose his heart.

And when he does that, **the Gospel wants us to see Bartimaeus as the model disciple who gives up everything to follow Jesus.** Remember what's happening here in Mark's Gospel. This is our 4th week in the same chapter. It began when Jesus told his followers that the only way to enter God's Kingdom was to enter like a helpless *child* (10.15). Then we heard about a *rich man* who was unable to follow Jesus because his many possessions got in the way (10.17-31). Last week we heard about two of Jesus' closest followers arguing about which one was going to receive the most glory (10.35-45). None of the best candidates can figure it out. Neither the rich guy nor the disciples can figure out how to enter God's Kingdom like a helpless child.

Until here, finally at the end of the chapter, we see Bartimaeus, the blind beggar; "throwing off his cloak" (10.50) – probably the man's only possession, and also the place where he stored his money. If you're a blind man in a crowd, good luck finding that again. Bartimaeus throw off everything and runs to Jesus. Two weeks ago the Rich man was unwilling to surrender his possessions. Today Bartimaeus throws away his only possession. Last week the Sons of Thunder, James & John, asked for power. Today Bartimaeus asks for mercy.⁴ "After a whole series of episodes in which the [disciples & the crowd] do not get it, here, just

⁴ cf. Witherington, *Socio Rhetorical Commentary on Mark*

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."⁵

How much does it cost to sit on the side of the road? That's the question today. At the beginning of the story Bartimaeus didn't have a choice. But plenty of others did: the rich man, the disciples, and if we're honest, most of us too. Today the Gospel invites us to see that whoever we are, the cost of following Jesus - and receiving God's mercy - is always the same. The cost of mercy is *exposing* our vulnerability, *extending* ourselves in a living relationship with God, and then *exposing* the desires & wounds of our hearts. Maybe it sounds like a lot. Maybe it sounds costly. And maybe it is, until we 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, the cost of following Jesus sounds like a pretty good deal.

Amen.

⁵ Placher, *Belief Theological Commentary: Mark*. p.155