

## Bartimaeus and the Affirmation of Agency

Ken Wilson, 11.11.18

Gospel of Mark may have been first of four gospels written. Can read it or listen to it on audio 84 minutes.

Last half (11-16) taken up with final trip to Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified. It shows Jesus being **ostracized** by all important people/groups in his life: his religious elders, family, supporters, disciples, Roman officials. **Survivor**, where they vote you off island? An actual practice in ancient Greece—an unpopular citizen could be banished for 10 years by a public vote. Write name of person on a shell (in Gk *ostrakon*)—where we get our word ostracize.

They say being ostracized is a bigger blow, a bigger trauma, than losing a close loved one. A form of psychological torture—it led Jesus to feel he was abandoned by God. If you have ever been ostracized, this story is about your experience: Jesus has been there done that, gets it.

First half (1-10) are about Jesus' rise in popularity as a holy man.

Seen that PBS special about Hindu holy woman, Amma, hugging saint. People line up for hours to get a hug. By chapter 10 Jesus is drawing this kind of attention. Everyone wants a piece of him.

It about how all different kinds of people with different aims approach Jesus: “crowds gathered to him...Pharisees approached and tested him with questions...they [parents] brought small children to him that he might bless them...someone [a young & wealthy man] ran up to him...James and John approach him....and finally Bartimaeus.” Concern of anyone reading gospel of Mark: who is Jesus and how might I approach him? Coming to church is an act of approaching Jesus or the God Jesus represents.

Which brings us to the last approach, that of a blind beggar:

Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (which means “son of Timaeus”), was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” So they called to the blind man, “Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.” Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came

to Jesus. “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him. The blind man said, “Rabbi, I want to see.” <sup>52</sup> “Go,” said Jesus, “your faith has healed you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road (10: 46–52)

Every detail of this approach shouts **chutzpah**: “he began to shout” implies he was yelling for a while ... many told him to shut up and he shouted all more [imagine scene] Jesus stopped. Bartimaeus, a blind beggar sitting by side of a crowded road got the holy man, to stop and the holy man said, “Call him!” Then Barti threw his cloak aside, sprang to his feet and came to Jesus.

What is **chutzpah**? Willingness to assert yourself, to advocate for yourself, to ask-insist, to insert yourself, especially against social pressure to be quiet or remain invisible.

Chutzpah implies a strong sense of self, asserted against social convention, expectations ... an act of uncool.

Person w chutzpah is exercising what psychologist calls “**agency**”: capacity of individuals to act independently and make own free choices. **Oppression**--political, religious, legal, social--is effort of powerful to limit a person or a group’s agency.

Nancy in struggle with teenage daughter over choices, decisions.

Perplexed, troubled, feeling responsible like parents do. Took a nap ... and Blanche Wilson came to her. [Blanche in Nancy’s life—gentle kind whereas her own mother bossy] Blanche, who would normally not give any unsolicited advice, very gently said to Nancy, “**Tell Maja she has a choice.**” Nancy experienced that as a liberating corrective: don’t question Maja’s choices, pressure her to make the choices you want her to make. **Affirm her agency.**

Jesus here is affirming the agency of Bartimaeus. “**What you want me to do for you?**” at first seems odd. *Dude, I’m blind, you’re a healer, take a guess!* Middle Eastern scholar Ken Bailey says in traditional ME cultures, beggars had a respected role in community. Torah stipulated obligation of “mitzvah”—righteous deeds of charity. (True in Islam.) Only people with verifiable handicaps could fulfill this role. It was way he made his living.

Jesus didn’t presume to know what Bartimaeus wanted. He asked him. He was affirming his agency. You notice after healing, what does Jesus say? He says, “**Go, your faith, Bartimaeus has healed you.**” He ascribes agency to Bartimaeus in his own healing!

And despite the fact that Jesus says, **Go**—sends him on his way, Bartimaeus doesn't go. Instead, he becomes a follower. (Elsewhere, something you were summoned to)

From start to finish this guy is exercising his **agency**, despite social efforts to limit or mute or restrain his agency.

Here's how I see this applying to many of our stories-situations.

Many of you, I know, have undergone epic struggles with God—being told things about yourself that you were told you ought to be ashamed of, and maybe you bought it, but over time, it didn't ring true. How did you get out of that dead-end hell hole?

You exercised your agency to say, "**This is who I am!**" — at the time, it didn't feel pretty ... you were exercising your agency against external pressure not to (some of which you internalized. So this was an intense psychological and spiritual struggle for you.

Within your religious context, you may have been made to feel that this act of agency was offensive – like a crude and brazen act of selfishness disrupting the peace of your community.

Of course, applies to many of you asserting your sexuality or non-conforming gender identity, but this applies to many of us with other questions of identity or direction that need to be asserted in face of opposition, requiring chutzpah:

- Taking a path that differs from family expectations —Fayeannette. Or something as simple as coming to a church like this

Often, in the moment that feels like doing something wrong ... just as the crowd was trying to tell Bartimaeus, Shut up!

But here's the thing: in the middle of that external pressure on you it could be that Jesus is stopping, calling for you, and when you spring up to come to him, you find that he interacts with you in a way that affirms your agency ... and that he's actually fine with your assertion of yourself ...

He actually **strengthens** your sense of yourself rather imposing something on you that isn't you ... he invites & delights in your chutzpah.

Therapy, working out some of the disruptions experienced later in my pastoral career as a result of changing views on certain things. When you think Jesus is leading you to do something and that something turns out to be costly, you can begin to wonder about Jesus. Like he is some hard master to follow.

But as I was exploring this question I realized: at no point did I feel a command from Jesus to do anything about LGBTQ inclusion. No pressure from Jesus to change my mind. Instead, what I experienced is freedom from Jesus to do what I already believed was right even though it ran crosswise to my religious crowd.

There's more room in God than we think for us to exercise our agency. Joining CRC church .... Canons of Dort

"It may be true, it may be what the Bible teaches, [what did I know at age 20?] but if it is, it's not something we are allowed to say, and it's not something I have any intention of believing."

Conscientious Objection

QUIET REFLECTION