

Part of my training to be a pastor included a summer of Clinical Pastoral Education, or CPE. This training meant serving as a hospital chaplain for the summer, on the 4th floor of Genesis East in Davenport. There were six of us doing our training and in addition to our regular floor assignment, we took turns serving on call. When we were on call, we carried the beeper and could be called in at any time, day or night. Calls were usually pretty serious situations, and I know if I were to ever here the tone of that beeper again, my heart would immediately begin racing.

I was pretty nervous before I started CPE. What possible help could I offer to people in crisis? What did I know? What could I say? I only had one semester of seminary under my belt. My background in graphic design and marketing did not seem to be good preparation for this. What was I going to do? Design a logo? Work up a tagline?

But I remember one time I was called because a family had gathered for their relative who'd been brought to the hospital by ambulance, after crashing his motorcycle. Things did not look good for him, and the family had requested the chaplain. Me.

As I walked to the waiting room, I wondered what I would do. But when I got there, what I did do was gather the family in a circle. We grabbed hands and I prayed. And in the words of that prayer I found strength. Because that's what I knew, that's what I could say, that's the help I could offer. Through the words of a prayer, the power and presence of God came into that space and into the families need. What I learned then, and so many times that have followed, is that God had called me into that moment, and what I couldn't do, God could.

Take heart. Get up. He is calling you.

Reliance on God is a lesson that the blind beggar Bartimaeus seems to have already learned by the time we meet him in this part of Mark's gospel. And surely he has learned it the hard way, because as one who is blind, poor and a social nobody, there is much that he cannot do and little that he can offer.

Mark offers a curious amount of detail in this story. First, he shares with us the name of this social nobody. This blind beggar on the outskirts of Jericho. Not just his name either, but his connection. Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus. Very few people are named in scripture beyond Jesus and his disciples. But this guy gets a name. Curious.

Then there is complexity to his effort to connect with Jesus. He calls out, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me?" Right there we see he knows something of who Jesus is, even though Jesus will ultimately reject the label, "Son of David," In a way that other don't, Bartimaeus recognizes Jesus as an agent of God. When the crowd tries to silence him, he cried out more loudly. That cry brings Jesus to a standstill. "Call him here." Jesus says to the crowd, who quickly change their tune. "Take heart. Get up. He is calling you."

Hearing this Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and springs up to come to Jesus. Again, curious detail. And surprising. A beggar would not have much, and if he was lucky enough to have a cloak, a blind beggar wouldn't throw it aside to a place where he would not easily find it again. And springing up? That doesn't seem like a wise action on the part of a blind man, especially in the midst of a crowd.

Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for you." The exact words he just asked James and John, who wanted the privilege of sitting at his right and left hand in glory—they actually want a share of Jesus' future glory. But the blind man has a simpler and more prosaic request.

“Let me see again.” Jesus tells him, “Go, your faith has made you well, or even, your faith has saved you.” And immediately, the blind man regained his sight and followed Jesus on his way.

Certainly, part of the reason for the specific details offered in this story must be to highlight the contrast between this encounter with Jesus and the two encounters that immediately preceded it.

There’s who they are. Bartimaeus asks for something from Jesus, just as James and John did, and before them, the rich man. James and John are insiders by virtue of being members of Jesus’ inner circle—his disciples—those chosen and particularly invited to follow him. The rich man, or the man with many possessions, is an insider by virtue of his economic standing. In that culture, as in ours today, wealth automatically established social status. But Bartimaeus is no kind of insider. He’s poor. He’s blind, which would have been assumed to be a sign of his or his family’s sinfulness. He’s reliant on the generosity of others with no real way to reciprocate.

There’s what they want. Bartimaeus invites Jesus’ action in his life. He asks for Jesus’ mercy. And then when Jesus asks him specifically what he can do for him, his sight. The rich man wants to know what “What can *I* do to inherit eternal life.” James and John ask for what they can get, a share of Jesus’ glory, without considering what that might cost.

There’s what results. Bartimaeus receives his sight and then follows Jesus. James and John never really understood what it was they were asking and clearly have not understood Jesus’ as they have traveled with him. And the rich man is unable to give up his possessions and so is unable to follow Jesus.

In many ways, this story of Bartimaeus acts as an illustration of Jesus’ recent teaching. The man with many possessions finds that his inability to give them up becomes a barrier to following Jesus, but Jesus tells his disciples that with God, those things that are impossible

become possible. Bartimaeus' blindness is no longer an impediment to following Jesus. The impossible has become possible.

James and John want to be given the glory of seats at Jesus' right and left hand, but they have no sense of the cost. Jesus tells them that those who want to be great must be a servant and those who want to be first must be slave to all. Meanwhile, the crowd, which includes the disciples, tries to keep Bartimaeus from speaking with Jesus, as if they could somehow stop the last from being made first and the impossible from being made possible.

In contrast to the outcomes in the story of the rich man and James and John, Jesus does for Bartimaeus what it is not possible for him to do for himself. Jesus raises up one who was last.

Bartimaeus takes heart, gets up and follows Jesus, because Jesus has called him into a new life.

There are five other occasions in scripture where people are told to "take heart."

The word means to be firm or resolute in the face of danger or adversity and in the New Testament, the invitation to take heart always comes because of something Jesus has done.

Jesus says to a man paralyzed, "...take heart for your sins are forgiven."

Jesus says to a woman who has been hemorrhaging for 12 years, "...take heart for your faith has made you well."

Jesus says to the disciples as he walks toward them across the stormy waters, "...take heart, it is I..."

Jesus says to his disciples as he prepares them for the time he will no longer be with them, "...take heart, for I have conquered the world."

Jesus says to Paul as he appears to him in his prison cell, "...take heart for as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness in Rome."

And the crowd, hearing Jesus invite the man to him, tells him, "...take heart, get up, for he is calling you."

Jesus forgives. Jesus restores. Jesus calls, Jesus conquers and Jesus is present. Often and particularly in times of great need, fear and anxiety. Through God's love which has come to us in Jesus, we are assured that when we can't, God can. When we are afraid, God gives us strength. When we're uncertain, God shows us a way forward. When we feel alone, God is with us. When we are broken, God grants forgiveness. That promise is made visible to us in our baptism, in this water, the water of new life. That promise is made real to us in the bread and wine, a nourishing meal that sustains us from week to week.

The six ninth graders who will affirm the promises of their baptism, have at times in their lives taken heart from what God has done on their behalf. They seem, at a certain level to already understand that when they can't, God can. They are open to receiving the work that God is doing in their lives.

I read that in their faith statements. One was blessed along with her family as her grandmother faced brain surgery and, out of the blue a random group of college students offered to pray for them. She was also able to see the way her grandmother was sustained in her faith. She believes in one God and knows she can't serve two masters.

Another struggled with trusting God, then doubting God and then feeling again the presence of God. She is comforted by the promise that faith can move mountains.

Another knew that when she couldn't magically fix people she loved, she could pray, trusting in God's goodness. She is comforted to know that God has a plan for her.

Another holds fast to the opening words of Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” With those words she knows that when she is anxious, or stressed, or losing sight of God, God will help her through it and that God is always working through her

Another likes to remember her answer to a confirmation question, “God is the big everything.” She remembers that God has said, “I am.” God is there, reaching out, raising her up, providing the solid rock upon which she is a strong and mighty force.

Another has felt more clearly and specifically her journey with Jesus in just the last years, and in that time has come to a greater certainty that Jesus is always with her. Through that assurance, she has become someone who is the caring presence of Jesus for others.

In a little bit, these six will affirm the promise God has made to them. A promise that was made visible in the water of their baptism. As they make their promises, confess their faith and receive again the blessing of the Spirit, we each may take hold of those same promises, make those same confessions and receive that same blessing of the Spirit.

Because what is true for them is true for all of us. Through God’s love which has come to us in Jesus, we are assured that when we can’t, God can. When we are afraid, God gives us strength. When we’re uncertain, God shows us a way forward. When we feel alone, God is with us. When we are broken, God grants forgiveness.

Bartimaeus, restored to sight and granted salvation, took heart and followed Jesus on the way.

Granted as we are the fullness of life in Jesus Christ, we too hear the invitation, “take heart. Get up. He is calling you.”