

“Make It Simple”

Mark 10:46-52

I want you to visualize this scene in your minds as I describe it to you.

Jesus and his disciples are walking up the dirt road to Jerusalem. The end of the road, the Passover Festival and Jerusalem are not far away. One last, small town to walk through. They come to Jericho, about 15 miles from Jerusalem.

People are lined up along Main Street, an annual ritual, so they can see and hear the different kinds of rabbis and teachers who will pass through on their pilgrimage to the Passover. As Jesus and his followers approach Jericho from the south, word quickly spread through the town that the young, audacious rebel from Galilee will soon be coming up Main Street with his followers.

The crowd along the street quickly swells to ten times its normal size, as everyone wants to at least get a glimpse of this thirty-year old man who has pitted himself against the traditions, the orthodoxy, and the religious leaders of his day. He is a rebel at a time when people are feeling beaten down and oppressed, and are looking for radical leadership. Could this young man, walking up our street, be the one we've been waiting and longing for?

As Jesus enters Jericho, he once again is overwhelmed by the crowd and the reception. As always, he takes advantage of the opportunity, to interpret scripture and teach with parables as he walks. People crowd around, straining their necks, trying not to miss a word that comes from his lips.

As Jesus approaches the northern gate of the town, he also is approaching something else. A blind beggar, Bart, is a permanent fixture at this gate, begging for handouts as travelers enter and leave the town from the north. Bart, with his sensitive ears, can hear the crowd coming, the tramping of many feet, a strong, singular voice, and a low murmuring of the crowd.

Bart asks a person standing nearby, “What’s happening? Who is this teacher passing by?” Bart hears that it is Jesus of Nazareth, the young rebel from Galilee. The name, “Jesus,” that is all Bart needs to hear.

He can feel the blood rushing to his head, his face turning red, the palms of his hands beginning to sweat, his heart pounding in his chest, and he begins to cry out at the top of his lungs, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

The local people respond immediately with embarrassment and try to screen out this beggar hanging out on the edge of town. They move over in front of him so Jesus will not have to see him. And with loud whispers over their shoulders they tell the beggar, “Be quiet!”

But Bart feels a strength inside him he has never felt before. He no longer cares that people are screening him out and telling him to shut-up. He cries out all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

And for the first time while walking through this town, the young Galilean stops and says, “Call him.” The townsmen look down at the ground, for now they are thoroughly embarrassed. They have unsuccessfully attempted to hide a less

desirable part of their community. The beggar has somehow broken through their screen with a loud voice and Jesus has somehow heard his cry for help.

The people finally turn around and face the blind man and say to him, “Take heart, rise, he is calling you.” Bart smiles, throws off his coat so he move faster, and as the crowd separates making a pathway for him, he hurries to Jesus.

Jesus returns Bart’s smile and says to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” “Master, let me receive my sight.” And Jesus says to him, “Go your way; your faith has made you well.” And immediately Bart receives his sight and follows Jesus on the way.

Now I want to take about two minutes and have everyone take a pencil or pen and write down somewhere on your bulletin or on a blank space on the announcement page, write down the names of five friends you have in this congregation. If you can’t think of five, write down as many as you can think of. People you know on a first name, personal basis.

I guarantee you that we have people sitting here this morning who have less than five names written down. And there are many, many more people who are not worshiping with us this morning but who are members here, who could not write down two names of people they are friends with in this congregation. I’m not picking on Divinity. It’s the same way in every large congregation.

Why? Why did the crowd try to screen this blind beggar from being seen or heard by Jesus? Bart was an outcast. He was living on the edge of town.

Panhandling outside Progressive Field. The trailer court. The divorced and single parent. Colored skin. No education. Shabby clothes. Ugly face. A grieving heart. A guilty conscience. Laziness. A new member. Most of you who could not write down five names are sitting on the edge of this community for a reason or reasons.

Part of it might be that you are being screened out by those in the “in crowd” as Bart was being screened out. Hopefully, the in-crowd will invite you in to become a part of one of its groups. Ideally, you would be invited to join one of the ministry committees, become a Sunday School teacher, join one of our Bible study groups or whatever other group in the church that might invite you in. Maybe you have been invited in and you said no because your spirit was not ready. You were not ready to “Make It Simple” as Bart made it simple by crying out to Jesus.

Or, still more likely, like Bart you have not received a sincere invitation, a sincere opening into a group. You could continue to sit at the gate, on the outside of the crowd, content with the knowledge that somewhere out there Jesus is walking by. And if someone invites you into the crowd to see Jesus and to follow him you may or may not accept the invitation.

Or you could follow the example of the blind beggar. You could allow yourself to be opened up to the spirit of Jesus, with blood rushing to your head, face turning red, hands sweating, heart pounding in your chest, and crying out at

the top of your lungs, “Let me be an usher too.” “Let me sing in the choir too!”

Maybe that’s what it will take to get in to the crowd.

For Bart, making it simple meant crying out and making your cry heard. And it takes faith. We, Lutherans even on Reformation Sunday struggle with getting this fired up about the church or about anything, for that matter. We have been taught to keep those emotions and feelings deep, down inside even if it means standing quietly on the sidelines.

When I began coaching high school football, 25 years ago, in N.D., I could not believe how difficult it was to get the kids fired up for a game. I would yell and scream, slap their helmets, bang their shoulder pads, and if I was lucky I could get the starters on an emotional high before we took the field. Those kids had learned all too well from their parents to keep their emotions under control and inside. And here comes this crazy pastor-coach telling them just the opposite. Let it out. Make It Simple. Get fired up!

I’ve observed it’s the same way here in Ohio. I go to a Buckeye-Highland football game and the starters, like our own Andrew Kronenberger, are fired up and maybe a few guys on the sideline. The rest of the team is standing there with their hands in their pants not saying a word. These are the ones who are totally out of the spirit of the game. These are the ones that every quarter I would have to run up and down the sidelines yelling at them and banging on them, trying to get them into the game. They have no spirit power. Go to any football game and watch the

sidelines and you will see what I mean. Go into any church and watch the people on the sidelines and you will see what I'm talking about.

The people on the sidelines who are not contributing are the blind Barts sitting on the edge of town waiting for handouts. Maybe Bart was ostracized. Maybe he was screened out. Maybe his talents and gifts were never recognized. Maybe Bart was never given the opportunity to become a starter and become a part of the in-crowd and its spirit power. Maybe he never learned how to make it simple.

But now as Jesus walks through Jericho and approaches the northern gate where Bart is sitting on the sidelines, Bart decides he has had enough. He has had enough of watching the same people doing everything; serving on a committee, going to a Bible study, teaching Sunday School. He decides it's time for him to get into the game. To get some of that spirit power.

Bart overcomes everyone's attempts to keep him out of the game and on the sidelines. Bart yells so loud and so persistently that the coach not only hears him but calls him. So for Bart and maybe for you the first step to getting off the sidelines and into the game is to yell loud and persistently until you are heard.

Then when the call comes for you to get up and contribute, like Bart you shed your coat, spring to your feet, and you are ready to respond and react in whatever ways you are asked.

When Bart is called and makes his way down the sidelines to the coach, the

coach responds to Bart's persistent yelling by asking the question, "What do you want me to do for you?" And the blind man says to him, "Coach, let me receive my sight." "Coach, let me get in the ball game." "Coach, let me contribute." "Coach, I am missing out on the spirit and power of this congregation when I am not actively participating and contributing." "Coach, I could not list five names of people that I know personally in this congregation and I am ready to do something about that."

And Jesus said to him, "Go your way; your faith has made you well." "Get in the game." And immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way.

The veil, the screen is removed from Bart's blind eyes through the miracle of faith just as the screens and veils that separate us from one another can be removed through the miracle of faith. For that miracle to happen it must be a faith with action. Bart's faith resulted in him taking action. Faith without action is dead. That's making it simple.

We could say; before I take action, before I get in the game and contribute, I'm going to wait till my kids get older. I'm going to wait until I quit drinking or until I lose some weight. I'm going to wait until I stop having this affair. I'm going to wait until somebody invites me. Or we can be like Bart and stop waiting, act on our faith, and follow Jesus on the way.

I invite you to examine yourselves this morning before you make your way

to the altar with your commitments for the coming year. Do you see yourself as a Bart, sitting on the sidelines of this congregation? Do you see yourself as part of the crowd screening out those sitting on the sideline? Or do you see yourself as the coach, enabling and encouraging everyone to become spirit-filled and contributing members of the team?

Our challenge and goal is to all become coaches. To all become as Christ-filled as possible. When Bart received his sight he could have gone in a lot of different directions, but his response was to follow Jesus on the way to Jerusalem. Bart knew he needed to make some changes in his life and he needed to grow.

What do you need to change? What needs to be removed from your life that is blinding you? Are you willing and strong enough in the spirit to come forward to the altar this morning and ask for those changes? Will the miracle of your faith give you new sight? New actions?

Spirit power is power collected and expended by spirit filled people. The purpose of this congregation is to help create more of this rarely developed power, and you are one of the potential power outlets . . . if not full time, at least now and then. The privilege of this congregation is to affirm who you are and to help you “make it simple” in using your God-given gifts to serve others.

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace so that by faith you may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 15:13)