

Mark 10: 46-52

“What a Silly Question!”

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The sermon title is my gut reaction to the scripture reading. Here is the internal conversation that went on: “Really, Jesus? You don’t see the need of this man? He is blind and he has to beg for a living. That is two huge major strikes against him. You see his physical condition and the reality of his social location as an outcast. In the eyes of everyone around him, he is being fully blamed for his own condition, and you asked, “Hey Bart, what do you want me to do for you this morning?” It a question reserved for the hair dresser, “And what are we doing today?” or our waitress in the restaurant, “What can I get you?” But you, Jesus, shouldn’t you know better? What a silly question!?”

Was it or wasn’t it? As I finished my internal conversation with Jesus, I realized that it actually was not so silly. Jesus asks a very important question because he does not assume to know what we need and want from life. Jesus is willing and open to let us dictate the terms of our life, and the terms of our healing.

Jesus’ question is not accidental. He is asking Bartimaeus what he really wants out of life. He is inviting him to explore his reasons for seeking Jesus’ help. And while the answer, “I want to see,” might seem obvious, Bartimaeus needs to proclaim it for his own sake. There is another place in scripture where Jesus asks an even more direct question: “Do you want to be made well?” At first sight, a silly question again, but taking a second look, a very important questions. Many people claim wanting to get well and healed and whole but do nothing to overcome their problems. Consciously or unconsciously they refuse to do what is necessary for this new life of wellness and wholeness. This refusal can block the healing energy God intends for them.

Perhaps, God is asking each one of us, "What do you want me to do for you?" With that question we are invited to explore the deepest desires of our heart and what we are willing to do to achieve them. God wants us to have abundant life; God wants everyone to have abundant life. But we need to answer God's call to bring new energies and possibilities into play.

What keeps us from exploring those deepest desires of our hearts? What keeps us from that kind of soul searching we know we need to do in our situation but we just can't bring ourselves to do it? I think its fear; fear of failure.

What would you do if you couldn't fail? What would you endeavor, dare, or try? What mission would you attempt, what venture would you risk, what great deed would you undertake? What kind of healing journey would you undertake if you knew it could not fail?

These are interesting questions to think about but not all that helpful because we know there *will* be failure. There just will. And if we only dream of doing things we can accomplish *without* failure, we will either be sorely disappointed or, realizing the naïveté of the question, never try.

So let me rephrase the question more realistically and faithfully: What would you do if you knew you might fail and it just didn't matter? I don't mean "didn't matter" in the sense that there would be no cost, or that it would be difficult or disappointing. No, what I mean is, what would you try if the attempt itself was worth it whether it succeeded or not? Or, even more, what would you risk if the ultimate outcome was guaranteed even if your immediate venture failed? What would you endeavor, dare, or try? What mission would you attempt, what venture would you risk, what great deed would you undertake?

What would you do if failure didn't matter? Would you, like Bartimaeus in today's Gospel reading, shout out for healing even though the people around you try to shush you into silence I wonder, could it be that Bartimaeus was so used to failure and disappointment that he saw no

reason *not* to try one more time? Or perhaps faithfulness itself is defined by trusting God enough to dare impossible deeds?

In the movie *Apollo 13*, NASA's Flight Director Gene Kranz (played by Ed Harris), boldly declares, "Failure is not an option." There are times and places when failure is not an option. But we know the opposite is more often true: failure is *regularly* the option. More to the point, if you're going to risk anything that matters, "*not* failing is not an option." Risk, you see, entails failure. Change entails failure. Creativity and innovation and experimentation all entail failure. And if we forget that we will either never try anything that matters or end up sorely disappointed. Failure is not an option; it actually is the road to success.

But even if failure is the road to success we don't like it. We live in an atychiphobic culture. It is the fear of failure. We avoid loss and failure like the plague. This fear of failure is built into us from an early age. Whether it be from our parents, school, work, or something else, most of us, either accidentally or overtly, have been trained to derive our self-worth from our successes and accomplishments. Winning becomes the most important goal in life.

The internet is full of advice of how to overcome failure, or one's fear of it. Failure is seen as the enemy and therefore needs to be overcome. But actually that does not cure failure; it's reinforced. The fear of failure can truly be paralyzing.

But our journey of life teaches us that not failing is not an option. There will be failure. Talk to any successful business owner and they will tell you that failure was part of the learning process. Talk to any scientist about the many times they failed in research, and the few times that brought success. Life is not about winning but about growing.

Failure can teach us valuable lessons, and if we embrace failure that way, we don't have to be afraid of it.

As part of my service to the community, I participate on the Institutional Review Board of South Shore Hospital. This board oversees all the medical research that is done at the hospital. As a lay person I have to muddle my way through all the research protocols, and most of it I don't understand. We lay people get to examine the consent forms that every patient who is eligible and wants to participate in a study has to sign.

And there is always that paragraph under **Benefits** that gets me: There is no guarantee that you will benefit from this research. That is a pretty deflating statement.

Depending on the protocol, most of these studies are involved. You are being prodded and poked, asked endless questions, and sometimes you will take medications that may help or may not. Failure is simply part of the research. And without people being willing to participate, willing to take risks, with all likelihood we would miss out on great medical advances that are designed toward the ultimate goal of healing.

“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asks. What would be our answer? What do we really want from Jesus, from our faith, from our life? Do we want justice, peace, equality or any of the other handful of things that the world calls idealistic? Do we want a healthy family life with kids that prosper and a spouse that loves unconditionally and forgives easily? Do we want to be healthy? Do we want abundant life? Do we want a God who is there for us? Who guides us? Comforts us? Heals us in body, mind and spirit? And if that is what we want, what are we willing to do to achieve that? I think today I am leaving you with more questions than answers but for a reason.

In his autobiography, *Night*, Jewish philosopher Elie Wiesel tells of growing up in a village in Hungary before being sent to a Nazi concentration camp. As a boy he befriended Moshe, the poor man who cleaned his synagogue. One day Moshe saw Elie in the synagogue praying. Moshe asked him, “Why do you pray?” And then, Moshe proceeded to tell Elie the way of questions. “Every question possesses a power that does not lie in the answer. Humans raise themselves to God by the questions they ask.” Elie then asked, “And why do you pray, Moshe?”

“I pray,” said Moshe, “that God will give me the strength to ask him the right questions.” (1)

Our Christian faith is more about asking the right questions than about finding the right answers. More than giving us the right answers in life, the Bible teaches us how to ask the right questions about life. More than giving us the right answers from God, the Bible shows us how to ask the right questions of God. It’s in the asking rather than the answering that we draw closer to God and to God’s will for our lives.

Here is what I know: The promise of the Gospel is that we are free ... free to risk, to dare, to love, to live, to work, to dream, and to struggle ... whether what we attempt seems great or small, likely or nearly impossible. And we are free to trust that God will use all of our lives – our successes and failures – to a good end.

The healing stories invite us to be God’s partners in our own healing and wholeness and that of this earth. Seeking and receiving healing and wholeness for body, mind, and spirit seems to be the goal, but that which we seek also has to come with a purpose or, if you will, a vision for what the future might hold. Amen.

Source:

1. Daniel T. Hans, “What do you want from God?” Gettysburg Presbyterian Church, Gettysburg, Penn., July 31, 2005, www.gettysburgpresbyterian.org.