

“Called Out from a Place of Brokenness”  
Mark 10:46-52  
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Beethoven and the Beatles: we'd be fools to listen to them expecting the same things. Hamlet and Spamalot: it's unlikely we'd approach them with the same mind. So it is with Scripture: we tune our ears to the different nuances of the psalms' poetry and Paul's letters and history's battles and begets. And when we come to this passage we will get what we are prepared to hear: a miracle story. It has all the right elements: a problem to be solved or healed; the miracle itself; the evidence of healing; and the healed man's response.

And yet ... and yet something is not quite right. It's weird: the problem takes up center stage in the story; the healing is just a tag line. The cure is accomplished without any touch or gesture from Jesus. The blind man is named, which is rare in healing stories. Then there's that odd fact that the word "call" is repeated three times in one verse. And it dawns on us: this is not just a miracle story. A second genre has been thrown into the blender in this passage: this is a "call story" too. The point of the story isn't the healing; it is the man's call to *discipleship*. The man called *to* Jesus to receive his sight, and instead he was called *by* Jesus to a new way of life. And I love this story – I love this story because I think it is just how our own faith works. (Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark: Interpretation Commentaries* (Louisville: John Knox, 1983), pp. 197-8).

Day after day, we sail along on our way: our families are healthy, our work is going well; we spend time with our friends and enjoy the blessings of our lives. And indeed, we know that we are blessed. But then, inevitably, something happens, and we are blind-sided. Our own health fails, or disease strikes someone we love. Our company falters, or our industry out-sources, or worse, we are told our services are no longer welcome. Our child gets a divorce, or our spouse walks out on us, or we recognize that the love our family once shared has ebbed out slowly, and only the shell remains. It comes on suddenly, or bit by bit; but inevitably, every one of us receives a word no one ever wants to hear. "It's malignant." "You're fired." "I'm leaving." And our lives are cut off at the knees.

And while we wouldn't wish it on anybody, it's often in this very place of brokenness that we seek the Lord's healing ... that we turn, in our need, and call on his name. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Some of us call because we have faith. And some of us call because it might work, and frankly we're hedging our bets. And some of us call simply because we've run out of places to turn. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me," we call out, not once, but over and over again, and we pray that he will respond.

It is a complex thing, when we call out from our brokenness, for the truth is that God gives some of us just what we hoped for, but many more do not receive what we desire. It is just a fact of the Christian faith that those who pray for

physical healing or financial recovery or family wholeness are not all restored to their prior state. And we inevitably ask, why? Trusted Christian leader Richard Foster is more honest than most when he says, “The most straightforward answer to this perplexing question is ‘I don’t know.’ I wish – desperately so – that every single person who sought Healing Prayer were instantaneously and totally healed. But it simply does not happen that way” (in *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home*, cited in *Practicing Our Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), ed. Dorothy C. Bass, p. 151).

Indeed, I for one am skeptical of those who measure the success of prayer by whether the desired outcome has been accomplished. Not that we intend to do so, but such accounting reduces the Lord to something of a vending machine into which we deposit our prayers, and from which we retrieve our treat. In fact, that kind of cost accounting pretends that we are still in control. Rev. Al Staggs, a Southern Baptist pastor and Vietnam War vet who lost his wife to cancer, speaks eloquently of how it can even function to push away those who need our prayer the most:

“A few weeks prior to my wife’s death, visiting friends recounted story after story of ‘miraculous’ answers to their prayers. After hearing a steady diet of incidents in which people were healed of their infirmities or found better paying jobs, my wife looked over at both of them and said simply, ‘It hasn’t

worked that way for us.’ Sometimes I just want to ask these people who become so excited about miraculous healing, ‘Has your vaunted prayer program yet kept anyone alive forever?’ Eventually we all die, including those who were healed of their particular disease. No one has yet managed to avoid the grim reaper. So why save our success stories for just those precious few who have been allowed a few months or years longer than they would otherwise have had?” (in *Christian Ethics Today*, June, 1998, cited by Martin Marty in *Context* (Chicago: Claretian), November 15, 1998, pp. 2-3).

But the fact that prayers are not answered the way we want them to be doesn’t mean that God has not heard us, nor that answers have not come. Al and April Staggs would not let themselves be pushed away, nor did they succumb to bitterness. And though they did not find the physical healing, they did receive new life anyway. They discovered that God’s grace is sufficient for every illness and every situation, and the miraculous presence of God abides with all his saints, and that even death – even death is not a defeat. They asked for healing, and received, instead, their calling – their calling to a deeper faith and an even more abundant life.

It’s not that we should *wish* for catastrophe. Far from it! One of my colleagues, Doug King, names it well when he says that we are not called “to go out and look for suffering in our lives as some sort of existential extra credit

project.” Nor is suffering its own twisted spiritual vending machine: put in the coinage and out comes the deep faith and abundant life. Says King: “Suffering does not, through some metaphysical Rube Goldbergian machination, create an inevitable journey to hope” (in an unpublished paper for *The Moveable Feast*, January, 2005).

Nevertheless ... nevertheless, suffering *can* lead us to hope, if only because it leads us to sink to our knees in our powerlessness. In a very helpful book on Christian practices, one writer, John Koenig, speaks of the way our desire for healing and our calling become woven together, one with the other: “When we are very ill we are brought to the place where life and death meet.” This place – this crossroads – leads us in a new direction. It leads us to “a reframing of what is important, an opportunity to let go of the frivolous or misguided patterns that structured our lives” when all was well. Says Koenig, “No one would choose illness for this reason, but many would testify that this illness brought them closer to God and to loved ones and made them feel, oddly, more alive than ever before. As one man put it, ‘Chronic illness can become an academy for the abundant life’” (*Practicing Our Faith*, pp. 150-1.)

Chronic illness or loss, financial distress or simply shattered dreams, whenever we encounter brokenness – whenever our world falls to pieces and we cannot put it back together again, that is precisely when we call on the Lord and

ask him for the help we need. And we discover – we discover that, all the while, he is calling us too.

I love this part of the story: “When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, Bartimaeus began to shout out 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!’ Jesus stood still and said, ‘Call him here.’ And they called the blind man, saying to him, ‘Take heart; get up, he is calling you.’” Take heart; get up; he is calling for you.

Do you see it? Can you see it? Jesus doesn’t call Bartimaeus because he is strong. He doesn’t call him because he is wealthy. He doesn’t tap him because he is bright. I don’t think he even calls him because he is *faithful*, for Bartimaeus, like all of the other disciples, will end up deserting Jesus too; at the cross, he will be nowhere to be found. Jesus calls Bartimaeus precisely because he is broken and blind and in need. Just as Jesus calls us.

We are so used to defining ourselves in terms of our success that it is hard to comprehend being wanted when we are down. I don’t know what it is – pride, or fear, or simply competition – but we shield our vulnerability and failures at all costs. And maybe that’s why we need to hear this story perhaps more than any other story in Scripture. We need to hear that *when we are broken and vulnerable and powerless*, the Lord is calling us too. Just as we are, not as we hope to be.

I don't know where your places of brokenness have been. I don't know where your vulnerability is right now. But I invite you right now to take a few moments in silent prayer, and consider your very weaknesses, your needs, even your fears. And I invite you to call to Jesus in your silent prayer, and ask him for his mercy.

We can't do this on our own. We are, in fact, not supposed to. Indeed, Jesus came to be broken for our sake, that we might be made whole. And we are invited to call on Jesus with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, to scream if we have to, to out-shout the nay-sayers who want to dissuade us, and the silencers who are embarrassed by our crying, and the soothers who want us to believe that everything will be OK if only we believe hard enough. We are urged to call on Jesus like Bartimaeus, yelling above the crowd. And then, we must listen. Shh! Do you hear him? Take heart, and hear: the Master is calling. He is calling, right now, for you. Amen.