

Mark 10:32-52
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On the Way

Jesus has been trying to teach the disciples what it means for him to be the Messiah, what following him entails. And bless their hearts, they just keep getting it wrong; they can't see it; they don't truly see or get him. In the text I just read, he explains for a third time what lies ahead in vivid detail. The Zebedee brothers respond by asking for prime cabinet positions in his coming kingdom. It's amazing to me that Jesus doesn't try to leave them behind, and draft a newer, better crop of followers, but—and this is good news for me and for us—he doesn't. And then they arrive in Jericho. It's the final stop before they head into Jerusalem, the destination where they've been headed all along.

There's no express lane heading up to Jerusalem, no shortcut. Jesus and the rest make their way bit by bit, taking the back roads, stopping by villages and one-light towns as they go. There's not much to notice about these towns, apparently. The mention of Jericho may invite us to connect Jesus' arrival with the ancient Israelites' entrance into the Promised Land after 40 long years of wandering, the moment when the walls came tumbling down. Maybe Mark wants us to recognize that a new liberation is coming. Or the mention of Jericho may simply be a geographic marker for Mark's first hearers, causing their ears to perk up at this town's proximity to Jerusalem. Jericho is not the main attraction, after all; it is main-attraction adjacent. Not much to offer, nothing to see really.

They are on the road, *and* they are on the way, or they are supposed to be. My English teachers would appreciate the translators' attempt not to be too repetitive in their word choice,

but each time we read or hear *road* or *roadside* or *journey* in this passage, the word is the same.

The word is *hodos*, and its primary translation is “way.” As scholar Brian Stoffregen points out:

We are told that Jesus and his disciples are on the **way** when Jesus asks, ‘Who do people say that I am?’ [back in chapter 8].

It is on the **way** that the disciples argue about who was the greatest [in chapter 9].

Jesus is back on the **way** ... when the rich man runs up to him. Because of his riches he goes away. He does not follow Jesus (10:17).

They are back on the **way** ... going up to Jerusalem, when Jesus tells the twelve what will happen to him [for a third time]...

When they come to Jericho, Bartimaeus is sitting by the **way** ... He is not yet ‘on the way,’ but by the side of the ‘way.’ He is an outsider.¹

It strikes me that Bartimaeus is by-the-way in other ways, too. He is an afterthought, a nobody, a distraction, an unwelcome detour as the disciples get about the important business at hand.

I’ve recently started reading a new book entitled *Thank You, Please Come Again: How Gas Stations Feed and Fuel the American South* by a photojournalist named Kate Medley. Inspired by a stop at the Farm & Garden Center 10 miles outside of Hillsborough, NC, Medley began interviewing the people who run what my grandparents used to call filling stations. “New Yorkers have bodegas,” Medley writes. “In the south, we have gas stations.” She writes about meeting Jeff Poynor, the owner of Pop’s in Banner, Mississippi that serves plate lunches to customers who “sit at large round tables, anchored by condiment-heavy lazy Susans.”² Poynor

¹ Brian P. Stoffregen, <https://www.crossmarks.com/brian/mark10x46.htm>

² Kate Medley, *Thank You, Please Come Again: How Gas Stations Feed and Fuel the American South* (Athens: Bitter Southerner, 2023) 15-16.

introduced Medley to five regulars known as “the 2 o’clock crowd,” one of whom is a retired and widowed UPS driver who eats every meal at that table. These people and these places are not on my radar or many peoples’ radars as a rule. They could be thought of as by-the-way towns or crossroads, overlooked and under considered by the bigger city people like me. They are not in positions of power, the positions James and John imagine for themselves.

Occasionally on *my* way to and from the beach, I may wonder about the people who live in these crossroads, about what they hope and dream and worry about and believe. But they are not often on my radar. Instead they are overlooked and forgotten as I blow through on *my* way to wherever I am going.

Just as I have no reason to think my bigger city issues are more pressing than the challenges facing the people who live in those by-the-way places, I also have no right to feel superior to the disciples and the crowd and their initial response to Bartimaeus. I can’t say that I always do this following business correctly or that I would respond to him in a faithful way either. Bartimaeus is one of those by-the-way kind of people, in the ditch, and honestly in the crowd’s way of getting where they think they need to get and doing what they think they need to do, and where they think Jesus is leading them. This is nothing new for Bartimaeus I would imagine. He has likely been overlooked and shooed out of the way for years, if not decades. He has eked out a living relying on the charity of anyone who has bothered to toss a coin or a morsel of food his way. But he will not be overlooked now, not if he can help it. Bartimaeus is not letting anyone get in the way of his being seen and healed by this Jesus of Nazareth character he’s heard so much about. So, he calls out to Jesus—squawks, really, according to the original Greek, and the crowd’s first impulse is to silence him and shut his bothersome self up.

Shush, Bartimaeus, can't you see that he is busy, that we are busy, on our way to important places to do important things? It's more than a shushing. They rebuke him, as if he is possessed, wrong, and/or evil for crying out for mercy at the top of his lungs.

And then Jesus stops in his tracks and tells the crowd to call Bartimaeus to him. Jesus—the one who has been setting the brisk pace and pressing toward Jerusalem, now stops and stands still. Nothing is more important than attending to this by-the-way one, nothing. And instead of impatiently brushing the crowd aside Jesus tells *them* to issue his invitation. He transforms the crowd from roadblocking rebukers into holy messengers of great and good news. In that moment, Jesus shows them and us once again who and what matters in his kingdom. He redirects the in-the-way crowd to offer hope to the by-the-way Bartimaeus. He is doing his best to show just how inclusive the love of God is, and he is showing them what it means to be not just on the road, but on the way, his way, God's way.

To be on the way means valuing the by-the-way ones, the ones whom the larger world has deemed as in the way, insignificant, or inconvenient. To be on the way means embracing the little ones and the broken ones. To be on the way means lifting up the lowly and tending to the broken. To be on the way means loving with abandon and risking power and popularity for the good of others, enemies included. To be on the way means looking for ways to serve others rather than seeking out ways to be served ourselves.

We are all of us, by the grace of God, on the way. Maybe we have been the on-*our*-way ones, the ones who have been too pressed, too focused on going *our* way to be bothered by the one squawking from the ditch. Or maybe we have been the by-the-way one, overlooked or bypassed as we cried out for mercy. My guess is that we have been or that we will have been

both at some point by the time all is said and done. And along the way, by the grace of God, every single one our lives will have been saved and transformed by Jesus.

The by-the-way filling stations that find a way to remain open do so not because they want a Michelin star or because they long to be on one of *Southern Living's* lists of must-see spots. While either of those might be good for business, these places remain open because they embrace their essential role in feeding and fueling their communities. They feed farmhands who wouldn't have another place to eat after a long day during planting season. They offer a table for a widower who needs more than 3 square meals to nourish and sustain his soul. And they offer a place to pause and refuel for any stranger who happens by.

The church is intended to be a filling station of sorts. At our best we are making sandwiches for Opportunity House, reading to kindergarteners, driving Meals on Wheels routes, and visiting the homebound. On our good days we are a place and a people focused on reaching out, inviting others to take heart, to come near Jesus while nourishing neighbors and strangers, regulars and passers-by, big shots and by-the-way types, too.

We will hear a lot about being on the road in the coming days and months. There's the Road to the Final Four, of course, and there's the road to the White House and the state house and the county commission, too. As we watch others on the road and walk these roads ourselves, I pray that we who have been called and saved and transformed by this Jesus of Nazareth will do our faithful best to follow where and how he leads. I pray that we who have been noticed and named by this one who stops in his tracks to save and serve the least and the lost—including us, will continue not simply on our way but on his way, THE way. And by the grace of God, I pray that we who have been claimed and saved by him continue to answer his

call to be a holy filling station of sorts, offering hope, nourishment, courage, and compassion to all who are by the way, in the way, or on the way, in Jesus' name.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.