

ASKING FOR HELP

Mark 10:46-52

Two-year old Sarah was in a time out. She had returned home from a weekend visit with her cousin Catherine who had taught her the fine art of whining and staging temper tantrums. Normally sweet and loving, Sarah had seriously pushed the envelope whining and pouting to get a rise out of her Dad and Mom, and when they failed to respond threw a full-blown screaming tantrum. Quietly, her Dad, Mike picked her up, placed her in her crib and asked her, "Have you forgotten who you are? You are Sarah Elizabeth. You are not your cousin Catherine. You need to remember who you are." One might think Sarah's parents; Mike and Helen had unrealistic expectations of their 2-year-old. But as Sarah began to calm down to hiccups and quiet tears, you could literally see the little wheels turning in her bright mind. When she started to fret a little about her time out, her Dad calmly asked her, Sarah, do you need help? Again, you could see her considering her options, "whine and stay in a time out, or ask for help?" Without hesitation, the whimpering stopped and Sarah, with a soft tremulous voice looked at her Dad with tear stained cheeks and said, "Help!" Mike picked up his daughter and cradling her in his arms proceeded to rock her to sleep.

"Help! I've fallen, and I can't get up!" You probably have seen this cheesy commercial – it's been around for years and still runs in various versions today. There was a time when you could hardly watch daytime TV without seeing the ad repeatedly. You know, it's the one for the push-button device that you wear around your neck, or on a wristband, that is supposed to summon help if you can't get to the phone. The commercial is aimed primarily at the elderly and disabled, but the senior lady on the floor in the commercial utters her call for help with such campy melodrama that Americans find it hilarious, even though the situations the button are designed to address are no laughing matter. Yeah, it is a pretty bad commercial, but maybe our laughter goes a little bit deeper than just making fun of horrible acting. Perhaps the reason that we find it amusing is because, in general, Americans think of asking for help as something one does only in the most dire of circumstances.

Maybe it's a guy thing. Maybe not. But in general, Americans are fiercely individualistic. Most of us have been raised with the image of people who pull up our own bootstraps making it hard to ask for help, even though we now have countless devices that make it possible for us to call for help whenever we need it. Even my Mom carried her cell phone wherever she went. "Asking for help is a universally dreaded endeavor," writes M. Nora Klaver in her anti-self help book, *Mayday: Asking for Help in Times of Need*. Whether we're struggling with getting that heavy bag in the overhead bin on the airplane or fixing a flat tire by the side of the road, Americans are much more likely to say, "I'm good" instead of "Can you help?" unless it's an emergency that involves calling in professional helpers like police and firefighters. If we fall and can't get up, we'd generally rather crawl out to the street, and get in the car than inconvenience someone else, and thus reveal our problem or weakness. "I got this," we'd prefer to say.

In her research, Klaver suggests a number of reasons we Americans don't ask for help, and try, instead, to do it on our own:

We were never taught how to ask for help and have few role models.

Our grandparents were part of a generation that valued hard work and self-sufficiency. Asking for help was only in play if one was, say, drowning at sea. That ethic of self-sufficiency has been passed down to us. We love our independence. Americans are becoming more isolated from one another as attendance has decreased in clubs and community service organizations, including the church. The arrival of the Internet enables us to pretty much do most things on our own by tapping on a few keys. We don't need to go to a physical store for a lot of our shopping, nor do we need to even be present in a classroom to get an education.

We don't think to ask.

We have been so brainwashed by the American ethic of self-sufficiency that asking for help just never comes to mind. We're so focused on caring for ourselves that we don't even realize when we need help.

It's easier to do it ourselves.

If you want something done right, do it yourself! Right? We don't want to be indebted to anyone and be in a position of having to reciprocate someday.

We're afraid to ask.

We're afraid of what asking for help might say about us. We'd rather die a thousand deaths than have someone else think that we can't do things on our own. In short, we're very good at trying to do it ourselves, achieving modest results, instead of getting real help and making real progress. We miss out on the gifts that someone else can give us.

This morning, in the Gospel of Mark, we meet someone who was not only unafraid to ask for help, he did so loudly and boldly. The gospel of Mark tells us that Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, is sitting by the roadside when he gets word that Jesus is approaching, and this news causes him to cry out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (10:46-47). Jesus, Son of David. This is the first time that we hear this kind of language in Mark. For Bartimaeus to call Jesus "Son of David" is a very bold statement identifying the deep-seated longing of the Jewish people, for an anointed king, a legitimate heir to the throne of the great King David. It's a declaration of faith and conviction and confidence... and it's charged with political power as well. After all, the Roman governor hardly wanted his authority to be challenged by talk of a Jewish king.

In this passage from Mark, it is only a sightless man who sees Jesus clearly. Only blind Bartimaeus correctly identifies Jesus as the long-awaited Son of David. The crowd is annoyed by his shouting, and they sternly order him to be quiet (v. 48). It's possible that they're bothered by his brashness, feeling that blind beggars ought to be seen and not heard — from their perspective, he's like a homeless person sitting at a traffic light holding a sign, "Homeless and hungry. Grateful for anything." Or maybe they're nervous because of what he's saying, fearing the Roman military will bring the hammer down on anyone associated with a Jewish king.

In any case, Bartimaeus will not be silenced. He cries out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" (v. 48). His faith in Jesus will not be crushed by the criticism of the crowd, or by the fear of

what Rome might do to someone speaking in such a politically incorrect way. He shows a level of courage in his convictions that is so rare in first-century Judea, not to mention 21st century America. He doesn't care that the people around him are telling him to shut up. And he's not concerned about the punishment he might receive for speaking openly about his faith. He just does it. And the result? Jesus stops in his tracks and says, "Call him here" (v. 49).

I get the feeling that the crowd goes silent at this point, surprised that a celebrity like Jesus would respond to the shrieks of a blind man sitting in the dirt. But the crowd passes the word to the blind man, and he responds by throwing off his cloak and springing up to meet Jesus. Blind Bartimaeus knows that Jesus is the real deal. The true Son of David. A person with authentic mercy and awe-inspiring power. He's so excited that he springs up and comes to Jesus, which is an act of real faithfulness for a man who can't see where he is going.

"What do you want me to do for you?" asks Jesus when they are standing face to face (v. 51). What an intriguing question. Bartimaeus is a beggar, so he could've asked for a bag of gold. He's got no status in the community, so he could've asked for the respect of others. He's unemployed, so he could've asked for a job. He's made his mistakes in life, so he could've asked for forgiveness. "What do you want me to do for you?" is the question that Jesus puts before him. It's open-ended. Non-directive. A blank check, just waiting to be filled in. Bartimaeus says, "My teacher, let me see again" (v. 51). It's a simple and straightforward request, but one that's much harder to fulfill than a plea for a job or a bag of gold or even a place of honor in the community. "Let me see again" is what blind Bart requests, trusting Jesus to be both infinitely powerful and endlessly merciful. He's asking his Almighty King to remove his blindness and give him the gift of sight.

"Go," says Jesus; "your faith has made you well." And immediately Bartimaeus regains his sight and follows Jesus on the way (v. 52). Unlike the rich man who would not follow Jesus (v. 22), Bartimaeus falls in behind his master. And unlike the disciples who shook with fear (v. 32), Bartimaeus shows nothing but spontaneous enthusiasm. In all likelihood, he becomes one of the cheering fans who surround Jesus as he enters Jerusalem, saying, "Hosanna! ... Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!" (11:9-10).

This morning, I invite you to place yourself in this Gospel story. Imagine you are the one sitting along the way when Jesus and his disciples pass by. You are not there by chance. You had heard that this Jesus, who performs miracles, is coming to town. Somehow, you manage to get as close to the roadway as possible securing a spot where you can cry out to Jesus. Close your eyes and in your mind's eye, picture the dusty road lined with palm trees. Hear the sounds of the crowd, people going to market, the animals being led to the temple for slaughter. Are there children present? Can you hear the voices of children playing? In the midst of all this chaos, you hear the voice of Jesus talking with his disciples and you cry out – "Jesus, Son of David. Have mercy on me!" Even though people try to shush you, you keep saying it, each time more loudly than the time before. Suddenly, you hear Jesus, "What do you want me to do for you?" And you say...?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.