

Chapter 6

THE CROWD AS SILENCER

When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he 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!"

—Mark 10:47–48

THE NARRATIVE OF A BLIND MAN FORCED TO BEG BEFORE Jesus occurs in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 20:29–34; Mark 10:46–52; Luke 18:35–43). Only in the narrative of Mark is the blind man given a name, Bartimaeus. In Luke he remains unnamed, and in Matthew there are two blind men who beg, both unnamed. The action in our Markan passage is clear and terse, and it makes readily apparent the way in which the narrative relates to our theme of silence.

BARTIMAEUS

Mark's telling of the story begins with a panoramic view of the larger landscape of Jericho, the disciples, and a large crowd, and then zooms in on the blind man

who begs. The large screen features not only Jesus and his disciples but also a large crowd of common folk who were eagerly attracted to Jesus. Our attention is drawn immediately to the blind man.

Blind Bartimaeus knew about Jesus of Nazareth. He had heard the popular stories that Jesus of Nazareth was a healer who was not domesticated by normal protocols and was not committed to custodial care for the sake of the status quo (see Mark 1:28). Prior to our narrative Jesus had accumulated ample narrative evidence that he possessed transformative power that moved well beyond the capacity of official institutions and agents. It is no wonder that Jesus drew a crowd. It is no wonder, moreover, that Bartimaeus sought him out.

Bartimaeus was a helpless man who depended on the generosity of neighbors. But neighborly generosity could do no more for him than custodial maintenance. Not surprisingly, he wanted more than that. He wanted restoration and rehabilitation, and he knew from long-suffering reality that custodial care, generous and indispensable as it might be, would never result in rehabilitation. He had to reach outside custodial care. He took that risk in his readiness to call out to Jesus. Maybe he had joined the crowd for just that purpose. Or maybe the excitement of the moment drew him out. He knew Jesus' name and identity. He accepted Jesus' popular pedigree as "Son of David," therefore the awaited, saving Messiah, and therefore the bearer of new historical, bodily possibility! Bartimaeus does not quibble about the correctness of that identity. It is good enough for him. He accepts as an act of hope.

He breaks the silence of his disability with an urgent imperative petition: "Have mercy on me!" (Mark 10:47). He does not decorate his need. He does not try to justify his imperative. He does not bargain, or bribe, or flatter, or offer motivation to Jesus. His imperative is the raw reality of his disabled life. With regard to his imperative petition, Meda Stamper has gone some effective distance in showing that in the Markan narratives many of the interactions between needy people and Jesus turn on the utterance of lament and thus echo the lament tradition of Israel that we know in the book of Psalms (see for example Pss. 6:2; 9:13).¹ Such an utterance, as in the ancient psalms, attests a need and requires a response that will relieve the need. In the ancient psalms most often, but not always, a good response is given. From that old tradition, Bartimaeus dares to hope and expect that his own lament may receive affirmative attention from Jesus, whom he takes to be the bearer of God's healing capacity.

THE CROWD AS SILENCERS

The interaction of the story, however, is not simply between Bartimaeus and Jesus, whom he addressed. We have already seen that Jesus is accompanied by a great crowd. And now that crowd actively enters the story of Bartimaeus: "Many sternly ordered him to be quiet" (v. 48). They are the silencers in an immense contest between *silence* and *the breaking of silence*. We are not told why the crowd ordered Bartimaeus to shut up. Perhaps they wanted to protect Jesus from such

an annoyance. Perhaps they thought Jesus had more important matters with which to deal. Perhaps they knew that Bartimaeus was a recurring social pest and embarrassment, and they thought, “Not him again.” Maybe he is like the kind of inconvenient pests who hang around the church. Perhaps they figured Jesus was too dangerous as a subversive to established order and did not want to witness a subversive and unauthorized healing. Perhaps they recognized that the title Bartimaeus had assigned Jesus, “Son of David,” would evoke the hostility of Rome or, for that matter, the opposition of the guardians of Jewish tradition. We do not know; we only know that the crowd was readily mobilized for silence.

This is, for Mark, surely the same crowd (same word) that shows up before Pilate when at the festival the crowd had asked the Roman governor to function according to custom and release a prisoner (Mark 15:6–15). The governor wanted to release Jesus, whom he judged to be innocent, yet he needed the permission of the crowd. He may have had imperial authority, but he faced political reality, and the crowd would not grant the governor the permission that he sought. The reason for the crowd’s resistance to the release of Jesus, we are told, is that the religious authorities who were threatened by the inexplicable authority of Jesus (the chief priests) had “stirred up” the crowd.

The crowd was easily mobilized. Perhaps the crowd, in its wisdom, knew that the release of Jesus would give this dangerous Jesus room to act, which would in turn evoke imperial hostility. In any case, the crowd, in this scene, following reactionary priestly leadership,

voted for the status quo. We see the crowd before Pilate with its insistence:

Pilate spoke to them again, “Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?” They shouted back, “Crucify him!” Pilate asked them, “Why, what evil has he done?” And they shouted all the more, “Crucify him!” (Mark 15:12–13)

That scene invites us to imagine that in the Bartimaeus narrative it is the same crowd that was readily mobilized against the petitionary summon to Jesus. In the scene with Pilate, they wanted Jesus permanently silenced. Now in our narrative, they wanted Bartimaeus silenced, because he might evoke transformative trouble.

The crowd, in its uncritical political engagement, is not always discerning about new possibility that comes with risk and often votes in fear for the status quo.

Apparently, Jesus did not hear Bartimaeus’s cry for mercy when he first broke the silence. Perhaps his voice was drowned out by the crowd noise. There is more than one way to silence an unwelcome voice. It would have been possible for the narrative to end there. The crowd might have prevailed, as it often does. Bartimaeus could have settled in resignation about his poverty-stricken disability. He might have surrendered to the silence and left the world unchanged. That is what the crowd hoped for. The crowd, in its uncritical

political engagement, is not always discerning about new possibility that comes with risk and often votes in fear for the status quo.

BARTIMAEUS PERSISTS

The story does not end with the intimidation of the crowd; if it ended there, we would not have the narrative. The wonder of the narrative is that Bartimaeus did not settle for resignation. He did not permit the silencers to win. He must have recognized that his present state was not “normal” for him, even though the crowd wished it to be his normal. The crowd always has a stake in pretending that the “abnormal” (in this case, being blind and begging) is “normal,” for such a recharacterization of the abnormal as normal precludes some from full socioeconomic, political functioning. It would have been easy enough for Bartimaeus to conclude that his current situation, unbearable as it was, was to be his normal to perpetuity. The crowd encouraged him in despair, because greater expectation is unsettling for all parties.

Thus Bartimaeus continues the story by way of his courage and his resolve. His first breaking of the silence did not succeed. His attempt was defeated by the crowd, and Jesus did not hear him. But he makes a second, greater effort to break the silence. His second effort is very much like his first effort: “‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’” (v. 48).

This time he does not name the name of Jesus but moves directly to the royal, messianic pedigree that had been assigned to Jesus. It is that identity of Jesus that

gives ground for his alternative future. Again he summons the “Son of David.” Again he issues his urgent petition. Again he offers no bribe, bargain, flattery, or motivation for Jesus, only the honest, raw need of body. It is all “again,” a second time like the first time.

Except this second time he cried out “even more loudly” (v. 48). He knew, in the face of the crowd, that a vigorous, resolved voice is required to break the silence that has the sanction of both the authorities and the crowd. We have seen in our own day in so many liberation struggles that the first cry for mercy does not succeed. The silencers are powerful and determined. Among us the silencers are the powerful, who have a stake in the status quo and do not mind some poverty-stricken disability, and those who collude with the powerful, often unwittingly.² The work of silencing, like that of this crowd, is variously by slogan, by intimidation, by deception, or by restrictive legislation. Emancipation does not succeed most often in a one-shot effort. More is required. Bartimaeus knew that, and he makes a second effort . . . “even more loudly”!

JESUS CALLS, BARTIMAEUS JUMPS

“More loudly” worked, as it often does. Jesus hears the cry of Bartimaeus and immediately wants to see him. He responds without hesitation to his petition for mercy. Alan Culpepper sees that in verse 49 the term “call” is used three times: Jesus *called* him; they *called* him. They said to Bartimaeus, “He is *calling* you.”³ The repeated verb may be only a summons to an encounter, but it may also be a call to faith and discipleship. The

blind man is being recruited to the Jesus movement. We are told then that “they” relayed the message to the blind man. Bartimaeus himself was not close enough to Jesus to hear his welcome. He was lost in the shuffle of the crowd. He required others to tell him of Jesus’ response to him. We are not told who “they” are, perhaps Jesus’ disciples or perhaps members of the crowd. If they are the latter, they may be the very ones who tried to silence Bartimaeus. But even if that is their identity, they are promptly responsive to Jesus’ invitation to Bartimaeus. They encouraged Bartimaeus. They issued two quick imperatives to him:

“Take heart!” They encouraged blind Bartimaeus not to miss his chance but to respond quickly and hopefully to Jesus’ invitation. Their imperative suggests that they recognized that Bartimaeus may have almost given up hope. But not quite!

“Get up!” Get moving! Do not miss your chance. Bartimaeus still has to make the first move. He has to initiate action that will become his restoration.

Bartimaeus accepts the urging of the crowd. He throws off his cloak that he had spread in order to receive alms. He left it behind the way folk do when they are called to Jesus, whether fishing nets or tax tables or their fathers. He will travel light in his hope-filled move.

He jumped up. He is ready! No doubt his eagerness concerns his prospect for healing and restoration. Beyond that, however, his immediately energetic response may suggest his readiness to sign on with Jesus because he already trusts that Jesus is the Lord of mercy.

SIGHT IS RESTORED

When Bartimaeus finally moves through the crowd to get to Jesus, the encounter is terse. Jesus offers only one question in his “intake interview.” Surely he could have guessed what Bartimaeus wanted and hoped for. But he required Bartimaeus to verbalize his need, a verbalization that amounts to an act of uncommon hope. He has come to Jesus with the expectation that he can and will be healed. Thus he answers Jesus’ question tersely and precisely: “My teacher, let me see again” (v. 51).⁴ That is all. He addresses Jesus as “My teacher,” the one who has the authority and the capacity to restore him.

Bartimaeus has screened out the crowd noise, whether the crowd is shushing him or encouraging him. Now there is only Jesus; he is in the presence of Jesus, and his breaking of the silence has gotten him there. In response to Bartimaeus, Jesus is equally terse. As is characteristic in these narratives of restoration, nothing is explained. The narrative evidences no need to know more, and no curiosity. It is enough to know and to see that interaction with Jesus is restorative. Jesus makes no claims for himself; he does not assert any authority. In fact he credits Bartimaeus’s “faith” with the wonder of restoration, as though to fend off any hint that he has healed. It is as though the command of Jesus (“Call him here”) and the presence of Jesus were enough of a trigger that permitted Bartimaeus to mobilize the restorative capacity of his own body. It could not have happened without Jesus!

The conclusion comes quickly: He saw . . . and he

followed. Notice that from the outset Bartimaeus had two disabilities. He was blind; now he can see. He was also poor, cast as a beggar, but the restoration of his sight says nothing about economic restoration, and we may suppose that he was as poor at the end of the narrative as he was at the outset. That, however, did not matter. He could continue to be poor because he now followed in the company of Jesus, the poor man from Nazareth.

TRANSFORMATIVE MERCY

Let us notice the pivot point of the narrative. Like all such narratives of restoration, this one turns in a dramatic moment from blindness to sight, from disability to restoration, from being “left behind” to being included in new company. Of course it is Jesus, as the narrative attests, who makes the decisive difference.

Jesus does not take the initiative. Jesus responds when he cried out “more loudly.”

But Jesus can enter into the narrative only at the behest of the beggar. Bartimaeus must take the initiative. He must cry out. He must cry out more loudly. He must break the silence. He must violate the protocols that kept him in his place of disability. He must break the silence of the crowd of enforcers who wanted him to stay permanently in his place of disability. It was his breaking of the silence that propels the story. Jesus

does not take the initiative. Jesus responds when Bartimaeus cried out “more loudly.”

The narrative is a model and prototype for every emancipation. Any bondage of spirit or of body depends on colluding silence. Any emancipation depends on breaking the silence. Bartimaeus had, it turns out, the capacity to break the silence, a capacity of which he had been unaware. He had that capacity not because he was a believer in Jesus but because he paid attention to the truthful demands of his body. His body bore undeniable witness to him that his present state was not normal and was not right. It is this bodily insistence that becomes his ground for hope.

We may finally focus on the two-fold petition of Bartimaeus: “Have mercy on me!” The verb *mercy* (have mercy; *eleeo*), is closely linked to the noun *eleos* (mercy, pity) and to another noun, *eleemosune* (alms), all of which show up in our word *eleemosynary*. The play on “mercy/alms” is worth attention because they belong to the same semantic field, though they are very different. There is at present a growing and important focus on “almsgiving” in the Bible and in the early church as a means to salvation.⁵ From the perspective of Reformation theology, such a claim sounds like “works righteousness.” But a compelling case is readily made that in the early church movement almsgiving was regarded as a way to “store up treasure in heaven” (Matt. 6:19). It is important to notice, however, that as a beggar Bartimaeus had not sought “alms” from Jesus; he sought restoration of sight. The same distinction is evident in the narrative

of Acts 3:1–10, in which the lame beggar asked Peter and John for alms. Peter responded,

“I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.” (Acts 3:6)

Alms, that is, many ministries of charity, provide maintenance help and welcome custodial relief; the importance of such aid should not be understated. They do not, however, in themselves provide any chance for transformation. Peter’s response is an indication that the earliest “poor church” had no resources for such relief. What it did have, however, was the capacity for restoration that was entrusted to it by Jesus:

And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. (Acts 3:7–8)

The narrative of Bartimaeus, reinforced by the narrative of Acts 3, allows us to make an important distinction between *alms* and their custodial maintenance and *transformative mercy* that permits restoration. Bartimaeus did not seek alms from Jesus, and Jesus did not give him alms. Bartimaeus sought restoration, and Jesus evoked his restoration. Almsgiving might sustain the beggar in a world where the silence is never broken, but when the silence is broken, as in the case of Bartimaeus, something very different becomes possible.

The narrative of Bartimaeus ends tersely, and we never hear from him again. We may imagine, however,

that his discipleship included teaching others that the way to restoration is by breaking the silence. Such a possibility, he knows, is on offer even in the face of the crowd that has such a large stake in the maintenance of silence for the sake of the status quo. He knows better. It is no wonder that he traveled with Jesus, the great silence breaker who broke the silence to offer new life.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Why do you think the crowd tried to silence Bartimaeus?
2. Name some persistent Bartimaeuses you have known and how they were treated by the church.
3. What do you think of the point that Jesus didn’t act until the man persisted and called out more loudly?
4. What is the difference between charity and transformative mercy? Name efforts you support in both categories.