

Please join me in prayer.

Hide me in your glory, gracious and loving God. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my redeemer, and my refuge. Amen.

Our passage today is another ordinary day for Jesus and his entourage. With the people that are following Jesus and his disciples, I imagine that there is like a parade (and I say like a parade because they are not accompanied by the grandiosity of music and other elements of the parade) whenever they would come into a certain town. Having this entourage, it will be hard for Jesus and his disciples to go somewhere incognito. These parades were symbolic because it was the pre-empting of his soon entrance to Jerusalem before his death. But we are not there yet. We will get there in a few months. For today, we will witness another working day for Jesus, and part of this working day is for us to see the message that we can glean to hopefully become a reminder.

Here's a checklist for us - for Bible-reading folks, we have read this part many times. For church-going folks, I am pretty sure you've heard a lot about our story in many sermons. If you like watching movies about the life of Jesus, you probably have seen this part many times too. I checked all three boxes for myself. Of course, in the first few times that I encountered this story, I was not a pastor yet, so I did not reflect deeper into the message. But today, I tried to look at the nuances that the passage brings, and with the help of interpretation resources, I discovered much more deeper meanings, and found messages that helps me validate what I stand for in my faith journey. As I think about it, I would end up saying – that makes more sense. Today, allow me to share those reflections with you.

So, Jesus is always surrounded by large crowds, probably not a big deal, right? He is enigmatic and people are usually drawn to enigma. There is no questioning whether the crowd that was following him were taking to heart his preaching or what they are witnessing him do, they are merely following him. If we are to translate this to our present post-millennial context, Jesus can be labelled as a sensation or an influencer. He has a huge following, if he has a YouTube channel, YouTube will be paying him huge amounts of dollars. I follow a few influencers or YouTube celebrities that share their life-stories in their vlogs (short videos about themselves, what they do, etc. that they post for public viewing). When I watch these life-stories, I kinda feel that I am knowing them more, and I am part of their inner online/virtual circle – not sure if the latter is true, but that is how I feel. Most of the time, this is how it works with the younger folks. There were situations where the followers can feel attached to the influencer/someone that they are following. In this attachment, the followers can sometimes be a little protective of the person that they are following. As I read our passage today, this is the concept that I am surmising. This is the reality that I am seeing as I read verse 28, when the many sternly ordered Bartimaeus to be quiet. The crowd were probably thinking that Jesus must have been tired from traveling and having a beggar call him might be a little too much work for him (Jesus). If we look at that verse from that perspective, we can say that their actions were coming from a good place...a place of concern for Jesus. Sometimes, we can be in this place, we are protective of the people around us that we try to protect them. There are actions that we do that are coming from a good place and we feel compelled that we do every thing in our capacities and capabilities to make sure that we 'protect' the people that we hold dear. To be honest there is nothing wrong with it.

Many years ago, my father was a pastor in Hong Kong and my parents were based there, I was to be the parent for my younger siblings. In this parenting role, I wanted to make sure that my siblings, especially my younger brother, were doing what they are supposed to do – my focus that time was their studies. At 9, my brother was a very good at drawings. He would draw people, animals, sceneries, every thing that he sees, he would draw. His notebooks were filled with drawings instead of notes that he was supposed to be writing in his classes. Being the academic geek that I am, I get frustrated when I see pages of his notebooks filled with drawings instead of lessons, so I would scold him and force him to quit drawing. Eventually, his artistic side was greatly thwarted, he no longer draws. For me, I wanted him to excel academically without considering that he can excel artistically. To be fair (to me), this was the time when success in school is measured by academic grades, and there was not enough room for other accomplishments. I was pretty strict with him because I wanted him to be the best that he can be, in my own terms and not in his own person. Looking back, I should have not done that...a little too late for him...eventually, for me, too. See, as the oldest child in the family, I controlled him because I knew that I know better...without considering his own abilities and allowing him to flourish on his own. Back then, I knew I was right and no one else was, so it's my way and nothing else. My husband would always say, 'my way or the highway'. Now, I rethink and see that my way was not the best, because I did not allow my brother to be the best person that I can be. Instead, at a young age, I set him up for failure. But good news though, my brother is now a manager of an upcoming coffee shop, so I think he finally figured out his own path and has become the best person that he can be. With minimal help from the older sister, he was able to flourish in his own terms. There are times when I find myself in my brother's shoes, that because I am younger, I get told what to do – I sometimes call it ageism. There are instances because I am a woman, men would tell me what to do, I call it sexism. Other times, because I am not an American, I get told of what I should do in the American society, I call that racism. Digging deeper in this very short scenario, the crowd missed the actual essence of Bartimaeus' supposed encounter with Jesus. Unfortunately, after following Jesus for quite a while, they forgot that he has a preference to those who are considered the least of these. The crowd decided what Jesus was all about – his life and his ministry. But Bartimaeus was adamant, so when he was being silenced, he shouted louder so that Jesus can hear him...because he knew what he needed and he was advocating for himself. And we see the happy ending in the story. This story reminds me that it is really good for people to advocate for themselves...always easier said than done, but it will be well worth it. I will set that aside for a while, we will pivot back later.

The other important message that I see in today's passage is how Jesus healed Bartimaeus. In all accounts, this is not the first time that Jesus gifted a blind person eyesight. But unlike the first incident, Jesus healed Bartimaeus without touching him. In verse 52, Jesus merely said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well'. Then the happy ending – 'Immediately he regained his sight and followed on the way'. This takes me to the reflection of how our faith can be strong enough to make miracles happen before our very eyes – well, literally for Bartimaeus, but just imagine this scene. Jesus saw something in Bartimaeus beyond his limitations. Unfortunately, in our present society, it is hard to go beyond the face value. We were conditioned to base our decisions on first impression – remember the saying 'first impression lasts'? Supposedly there is nothing wrong with that, but what makes that bad is when that face value causes blindness for us to see the actual value of things. Most of the time, we have been inundated with negativities that left us jaded...blinded in seeing the value and beauty of the world around us – whether with our fellow human beings or our fellow creations of God.

Now, let us pivot back to advocating. As beloved creations of God, we should be advocating for ourselves...learning, honoring and claiming what is good for us...whether it is for our physical safety and well-being, but more importantly, for our over-all health – physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. Bartimaeus showed this, and this is the invitation that the passage is giving to us. However, I also believe that we should be instrumental in advocating for people who unfortunately cannot advocate for themselves, humans and the rest of God's. So, let us allow our faith to heal our society's blindness and embody the love and grace that God gave to the world...this is how we can become the hands and feet of Jesus to the society that we are all a part of. May it be so. Amen.