

28 October 2018

Be bold, and mighty forces will come to your aid. Growing up, I heard that advice more than once, probably because I was naturally a quiet and shy kid. Growing up as a history buff, I always gravitated toward those historical figures who were not afraid. One of my favorite historical figures was Theodore Roosevelt.

He gave a speech on April 23, 1910 at the Sorbonne in Paris. In it, he described the Man in the Arena. He stated in part, “It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcomings; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place will never be with those cold and timid souls who neither no victory nor defeat.

I think Jesus would approve of that speech. In today’s gospel reading, we see a good example of Jesus’ response to such a person. Is there a lesson we can learn from it today? Jesus is journeying through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem and the cross. Jericho isn’t that far from Jerusalem, maybe about the distance between here and Middletown. I’m sure the sufferings he was about to begin were weighing on his mind. He hears a voice that rises

above the din of the surrounding crowd. It gets louder and louder and finally draws his attention.

At the side of the road is a blind man named Bartimaeus. We know from previous gospel stories that the plight of the blind is destitution and poverty. No one in Jericho is going to help this man rise above his current situation. Yet, when he hears who it is, he sees, not with his eyes but with his mind and heart, the one person who can help. He believes that Jesus is his only hope for a better life and that this may be his chance. Desperation drives him to be bold.

How does this boldness come out? He was persistent. He either didn't get Jesus' attention the first time or Jesus wanted to see how strong his faith was. His initial failure didn't deter him. The negative reaction of the crowd didn't deter him either. He kept calling and calling, and I am sure the volume of his pleas got louder and louder. His persistence was finally rewarded. Jesus stopped and called for him. The crowd, that just a few moments ago tried to shout him down, are now urging him on.

Next, his response was immediate. Mark tells us he threw aside his cloak and sprang up. Those are both words of action. The cloak that he threw aside probably had all the money he had collected that day. He was willing to risk the life he was living for the hope of something better. Next, he was direct. When Jesus asked him what he wanted, his response was five words. Bartimaeus knew his weakness and knew what he wanted.

Finally, the interaction with Jesus changed his life. Bartimaeus never went back to his old life. Of those that Jesus cured or healed, how many of them remained nameless? Do we know the names of the healed lepers? How about those from whom Jesus drove out demons? My guess is that when Mark was writing his gospel, Bartimaeus was around as one of the

early Christian disciples. He had invested everything in a cure. After Jesus paid back that investment, he invested everything in following Jesus and in the early Christian community.

Bartimaeus was bold and mighty forces came to his aid. He was the man in the arena who was not cold and timid. He risked all and knew the rewards of victory. A good way to measure our faith in Jesus Christ and how that reflects in our prayer life and relationship to him is to look at it compared to Bartimaeus. It can become very easy to rely on our own strength to deal with everything in our own lives. We only seem to call on Jesus Christ when we come to the crises or when we lose control. Then, when our prayers aren't answered to our satisfaction, we turn negative and our faith suffers even more. It can become a negative reinforcing cycle.

I would like to challenge all of us to be a Bartimaeus in all that we do, both in the big and small things in life. Jesus wants to have a personal relationship with us. We have to invest the time though. Without that, forget it. Having a daily prayer life is a must. For my own part, I have always felt the presence of Jesus more clearly when I make the time. Whether that is prayer, reading the daily mass readings, praying the rosary on my way into work, I find I have the peace to better live the gospel message; to follow him along the road.

What this daily practice really shows is persistence. Bartimaeus kept calling, even when Jesus didn't answer him. There will be times when your relationship will feel dry and distant. Some days, you will just not feel it. This often happens after you see a clear example of Jesus working in your life. Sometimes, Jesus wants to see, what I like to call, a grownup faith. Can we continue to walk the road with Jesus even when we aren't getting what we want right away? Do we keep calling, or are we fair weather Christians?

Bartimaeus was bold when Jesus called him. He knew what he wanted and didn't hesitate to throw away the money he collected that day for the greater prize. We must be the same way. Is there something standing in the way as your relationship with Jesus becomes more important? Are we clinging onto something small when Jesus wants us to reach for something greater? That bad habit or bad influence will, for sure, come into focus in the light of Jesus Christ. Others may even come to look at you differently too. Don't be surprised if a bold response to Jesus changes your life as much as it changed Bartimaeus' life.

One of the greatest stumbling blocks to a relationship with Jesus is the unanswered prayer. We have all experienced it. Several unanswered prayers left me very bitter for a number of years. How do we get over this? The first reading gives a good answer. Jeremiah reminds us that God is calling back the exiles. Those who feel left out, the blind, the lame, the weak, are being called as much as the strong. God did not forget those who left in tears. He will console them, bring them back, and provide for all their needs. Their circumstances will change.

It takes trust and faith though, doesn't it? Otherwise, this is just a bunch of words. Jesus came and suffered for us with great love. Do we think he did all of that just to forget about us later? God rescued the Israelites from slavery and exile multiple times. They had more than one exodus. Our final exodus was with Jesus to the cross. He is present for us as he was for Bartimaeus. Putting our faith and trust in him involves surrendering some of our control and admitting we may not always know what is best for our lives. We can trust that Jesus does though. He is there to walk the road with us, to hear our prayers and complaints, and to give us a gentle push in the right direction if we let him. Unfair circumstances and situations will

change if we stay in God's grace. They changed for Bartimaeus when the time was right.
They will change for us as well.