

New England Mothers and the Healing of Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52)

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Once, not too long ago, I was sitting in the sun room at the inn in Rockport with some friends when I confessed that I have been accused of not having enough empathy for people who are ill. "It isn't true," I said. "I can empathize, but I don't coddle. I was raised by a New England mother, and New England mothers don't coddle."

To my surprise, the room exploded in laughter, and I realized that everyone present had been raised by a New England mother. They got it. They understood completely.

New England mothers have a unique parenting style. Perhaps it comes from hundreds of years of harsh winters, or it may be from New England's Puritanical roots, but there it is. It doesn't matter what other culture is part of their makeup – Italian, Irish, French Canadian, or pure Yankee – there is a character that all New England mothers have in common: They always take good care of their children, and they never coddle. If you want sympathy, if you want to feel "special" when you aren't feeling up to par - then don't go to a New England mom. New England moms may move heaven and earth for you, but they will never coddle you.

For example:

If, as a child, you fall and scrape your knee while playing, you will get a band-aid instead of a kiss. "Now go back outside and play."

If your car gets stolen: "Were the keys in it?"

Once, when I was very young, I had a brand new red toothbrush, and I loved it, but unfortunately, I inadvertently dropped it down the toilet. I cried hard, I was so upset. "You shouldn't have had it there in the first place."

If you're looking for sympathy, don't go to a New England mom – go somewhere else! (Which is a very "New England Mom" kind of statement!)

This lack of coddling isn't an indication of a lack of love – New England mothers love their children tremendously. As I said, they will move heaven and earth for them. They love their children with a love that goes deep, despite their criticism.

New England mothers raise their children to be strong, kind, helpful, hardworking, and humble. You don't put yourself forward; if you see something that needs doing, you do it; if someone needs help, you show up and help - but don't expect it from anybody else because God helps those who help themselves – and they're not talking about helping yourself to another piece of cake. Oh, and by the way – you never take the last piece of cake. At least not without asking.

My uncle summed it up pretty well when he described my grandmother as "putting her children on a pedestal. She'd take them down and dust them off once in a while, but she'd put them right back up there." The key is that SHE would put them on a pedestal. If they tried to put themselves there, they'd get THOROUGHLY dusted.

So ... what do New England moms have to do with the story of Bartimaeus?

Bartimaeus was blind. Because he couldn't see, he couldn't work, and so he would wrap himself in his cloak and sit by the side of the road begging for his needs.

One day, there was more activity than usual in Jericho, where Bartimaeus lived. There were large numbers of people milling around, waiting for something. There was a "buzz" in Jericho that day. Excitement was in the air. Something important was about to happen, but Bartimaeus couldn't see what was going on, so he called out, asking people to tell him what was happening. Some people took pity on him.

"It's Jesus of Nazareth," they told him. "He is coming *this* way on his way to Jerusalem."

"I need to speak to him," Bartimaeus said. "It's important! I need to meet him!"

But the people ignored him. After all, he was only a blind beggar, of no importance in their social structure, and someone far more important was coming this way. Jesus had a reputation for teaching, preaching, and healing that preceded him.

Bartimaeus insisted, "Take me to the place where he will pass by," but like good New England mothers, the people told him to hush up and be quiet, and stop making a scene. You don't put yourself forward if you're a blind beggar. It isn't proper. It isn't right.

As the procession of people with Jesus came near, Bartimaeus cried out, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!" Despite the people's attempts to quiet him, he continued to cry out, and Jesus heard him and stopped the parade. "Who is that?"

"Oh, it's only a blind beggar."

Jesus said, "Bring him to me."

The people around Bartimaeus urged him to hurry and get up, for Jesus was calling him. "Quick! Quick! He wants to see you!" Again, very much like a New England mother: If you get attention you don't deserve, you'd better hurry up and take it, or the moment will be gone.

Bartimaeus then does an unusual thing for a blind beggar: He throws off his cloak and leaves it by roadside. Now think about that: Bartimaeus is blind. He just threw off the symbol of his stature, the object that not only protected him from the heat of the sun, the dust of the road, and any rain that might fall, but the very thing that identified him as needing the help of passersby, the very thing that helped him make his meager living. Because he flung his cloak aside, he can't see where it is to find it again.

One would have expected that he would bring the cloak with him, so Jesus could see who and what he was, but no – he flung his cloak away into oblivion and went to stand before Jesus, before all the crowd, who waited to see what Jesus would do.

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked.

"My teacher, let me see again."

And Jesus said, "Go. Your faith has made you well."

And Bartimaeus regained his sight and followed him on the way.

There are some key points in the story of Bartimaeus that we in the 21st century might miss.

- First, there is his name: Bartimaeus, or son of Timaeus, and Timaeus is translated as meaning 'honor.' And while every New England mother would think privately that her own child is a "son of honor," instead of being on a pedestal, Bartimaeus was the lowest of the low, a blind man who must beg for his living. There's irony there.
- Then there is that cloak – the cloak that not only protected him from the elements, but also was a sign of his condition. That cloak was a literal sign advertising his need for charity, and he tossed it aside knowing that he could not see to find it again. Without the cloak, he could not beg.

So doesn't it follow that Bartimaeus knew that he would no longer need that cloak? That he would no longer need to beg because he would be able to see? That is faith. That is HUGE faith. That is faith that eliminates the possibility of doubt.

And we mustn't forget the "New England moms" in the crowd who told Bartimaeus first to hush up and then to hurry up! Very typical.

In truth, what seems to be a simple story of healing actually has many layers:

- Jesus doesn't assume that he knows what Bartimaeus wants. He asks. That is an example we can follow in every place in our own lives from personal relationships to family to school and work and everywhere else we serve in the world. Seeing a blind man standing before him without a cloak, I kind of think that Jesus did know exactly what Bartimaeus wanted – but it's good that he asked, for it teaches us to ask, too. Asking also gave Bartimaeus an importance and dignity that hadn't been available to him from the society in which he lived – and *that* teaches us that we should do the same as we go about our daily lives serving God wherever we are, but especially in welcoming a stranger, working in the soup kitchen, visiting in hospitals, leading worship at Matheny Medical and Educational Center, building houses with Houses to Homes in Guatemala – there are no "lesser" folk in God's eyes.
- Another layer: It truly is his faith that saves Bartimaeus as he stands before Jesus, who not only sees who and what Bartimaeus is, but also that Bartimaeus believes – that he did not even bring that cloak with him. The healing power of faith rings throughout the stories about Jesus healing, from the woman who knew that if she could but touch his cloak her bleeding would stop, to Jairus, who believed that Jesus was his only hope for saving his daughter.

We in the 21st century know that the mind is more powerful than we often realize, and Jesus also knew that, and so did many who were healed by him. First, you must believe. Or must you? Sometimes belief is strong and causes us to act, yet other times we have doubts but act as if we believe anyway, and then faith comes flooding in. I leave you to ponder that one as we continue to read and listen to Scripture in the days and weeks ahead.

- And yet another layer: Jesus heals in different ways.
 - Sometimes that healing is a cure, which is different from healing the spirit.
 - Sometimes, the healing is visceral – Jesus spat on the ground and mixed his saliva with mud when he healed the man born blind.
 - Sometimes - a vocal command, as when he raised Lazarus from the dead.
 - Sometimes it involved touch, either on his part or on the part of someone who touched him, like the bleeding woman.

- And sometimes, it was a simple statement. “Go, your faith has made you well.” Faith like the ten lepers – faith like Bartimaeus.

The healing of Jesus is not always the same. The healing of Jesus is different for different people.

- There is one more layer we should not ignore: What happens next. For Bartimaeus, what happens next is that he follows Jesus along the way. That could mean that he literally joined the throngs of people along the road to Jerusalem, but remember that the earliest followers of Jesus were called “Followers of the Way.” Not Christians. Not Episcopalians. Followers of the Way – the way that Jesus taught, the way to live, the way to be, the way to die. The way to live and move and have our being in God’s light.

As Followers of the Way, it might be wise for us to remember the New England moms, for we won’t be coddled. We may not get special attention, and probably will not get everything we want in our lives, even when those are good things and things that are good for us.

Whether we believe first or take a leap of faith filled with doubts, if we fling off our cloaks and follow that road along the way, what happens next? What will we see? How are God’s realities different from our reality? Are we willing to find out?