

Church, I have an open question this morning. I am going to ask the question and wait. (pause) I can do that because I have plans for lunch that do not involve eating out. (pause) If you have plans for lunch please answer quickly; otherwise we might be here til dinner. Okay? Alright? Here we go. Church, what is it about staying the same – doing things the way we have always done them that is so attractive? Why is it so hard to change the status quo? (pause and wait for answers) I heard two answers this week which really stopped me in my tracks. The first came from Monday morning's staff meeting. "The status quo is like a warm blanket on a cold morning. Nobody wants to throw it off."¹ The second answer I heard came from a fellow minister in the area. "A church will not change until the status quo becomes more painful than the change itself."² Do you think that's true - a church will not buy in to making changes until their current situation becomes so painful they cannot stand for things to stay the way they are? (pause to wait for answers) I have to tell you, Church; staying exactly the way we are, because that is what we have always done, because it is comfortable, because it does not hurt or push us out of our comfort zones is exactly like being blind. This morning's passage just happens to be about a blind man. This blind man had been sitting by the side of the road waiting for people to give him "change" without the blind man having to get up or move or do anything.

Jesus and his disciples were leaving the city of Jericho. They were being followed by a great crowd of people. The people were talking amongst themselves as they passed by poor blind Bartimaeus sitting there by the side of the road begging for food or money. Bartimaeus heard them speaking about, "Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!'" (pause) Can't you picture it? The blind man sitting on the side of the road; not knowing which way to shout, and trying to get his voice over the crowd. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Can you imagine a more pitiful; heart breaking sight? This man wants change so badly he is willing to shout and cry for it. Blind Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus is crying out for a change, and he does not know where to look. As a matter of fact, he is not able to look because he is blind.

I think it is interesting the text says many tried to get Bartimaeus to be quiet. The text does not say Jesus' disciples told Bartimaeus to be quiet. Instead it was the people who were following Jesus in the crowd. I don't know what the people following Jesus were hoping to see or hear, but they clearly did not understand the message Jesus preached. (pause) I say they did not understand what Jesus preached because the text says they rebuked the blind man and told him to be silent. I understand that to mean three things. #1 Blind Bartimaeus had a big mouth and was successfully getting his message through the crowd. #2 The crowd were bothered by what Barimaeus was doing. Either he was hurting their ears; they did not think it was proper, or they were bothered that a beggar would be so uppity as to ask the Son of David, God's anointed, to do something for him. #3 Not all of those who follow Jesus or call themselves Christians are actually disciples. The proof is in the pudding so to speak. Disciples know from where our strength comes, and it shows in the way we treat other people – especially the people who are not like us.

Bartimaeus is not deterred or silenced by the crowd. Bartimaeus cries out more loudly, even defiantly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stops. Jesus has heard it all. Jesus says, "Call him." When I first read this I wondered to whom is Jesus speaking? It is not the disciples who speak to Bartimaeus. It is the people of the crowd who had been telling Bartimaeus to shut up. The crowd had to tell Bartimaeus to, "take heart; rise, He is calling you." Jesus had not called to anyone else in the crowd. Jesus called to Bartimaeus who had been persistently calling out to Jesus. Jesus says to Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" And

¹ Margaret Harris

² Dennis Shepherd

Bartimaeus said to him, "Master, let me receive my sight." And Jesus said to him, "Go your way; your faith has made you well." By saying this Jesus has validated Bartimaeus' persistence in reaching out to the Son of David. Sisters and brothers, Bartimaeus cried out to Jesus. Bartimaeus was persistent in crying out to Jesus. Even when those who follow Jesus tell Bartimaeus to shut up, Bartimaeus keeps trying.

So now I have to ask the really hard question. What are we *trying* to do? During Monday's staff meeting I asked what is the status quo here at Central? The staff looked at each other and flipped the question on me. (pause) They asked, what do *"I"* think the status quo is here at Central? (pause) I confess; it took me a few minutes and some wasted words to find the answer. (pause) This was my answer. Central has those who lead by pushing and those who do not want to cheer from the pews. That's how this church functions. There are those who want to do and to see things done. There are those who want to sit back and cheer, "You go do that great thing for God" but they don't want to do anything themselves. Then the pushers, push harder to get more people involved. Those who do not want to be pushed push back. Everybody gets tired and a lot of people grow resentful, or leave.

Here's my observation from other churches. All y'all can tell me if it applies to Central. There are two ways to get a cow to move. You can smack and push the cow from behind, or you can lead the cow from the front. When the cow is lead from the front it moves because the cow "WANTS TO." Do y'all know how hard it is to push a cow that does not want to move? Have you considered how hard it is to push a bull? When people lead by pushing they wear out, they burn out, and stuff stops happening at the church. Then the cheerleaders in the pews wonder why nothing is happening and complain and write ugly notes in the Word from the Pew. The pushers become frustrated that nobody wants to help so they turn nasty, say something hateful about the people of the church, and then leave. All the while people say things like, "I'm not being fed." (pause) Have y'all seen people in churches behave this way before? I gotta say. It starts to sound like the blind leading the blind.

Since we are all blind apart from the guidance of the Holy Spirit let's get real clear about what we all need to do. #1 John 6:44 says, "No one can come to me unless that father who sent me draws him." God is calling out to us now. That's how Bartimaeus was so moved to shout when he heard Jesus of Nazareth was walking by. #2 we have to do a better job of crying out and reaching out to Jesus. It is not enough to sit comfortably in our pews and go through the motions of following Jesus. The crowd did that and look out it turned out for them. It is not enough to sit and cheer from the pews, nor is it enough to push from behind. It is pretty hard to see Jesus up from when we are pushing the cow from behind. We have to do a better job of following Jesus and encouraging others to follow Jesus and not us. We have to do a better job of becoming more like Jesus in every aspect of our lives. What have we done today that has caused someone else harm? Let's try really hard not to do that tomorrow. Where have we failed to do good today? Let's do a better job tomorrow. And here is the most important part. What is it we cling to that has made us blind to the power of God's grace today? (pause) How might the reading of Scripture; prayer; fasting; participating (not just attending) but participating in worship, and acts of mercy and grace help us to see God better in the faces of our brothers and sisters in the pews – and in the faces of the people who are not like us outside those doors? Sisters and brothers when we are blind we think there are so many things we cannot do. Through Christ and the power of God's grace we discover more and more what the power of faith can do. Are we persistently seeking to be more like Jesus? Are we not trying because we do not believe we can be like Jesus? Let us not be blind to the possibilities. Instead let's follow Bartimaeus' example and remember persistence pays.

In the name of Jesus Christ,
Amen