

Sermon, 10/24/21

*The Lost Disciples of Jesus*  
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We all know Jesus had twelve disciples, the inner circle of *men* he chose to be his followers. Matthew, Mark, and Luke name them: Peter, his brother Andrew, James and John the sons of Zebedee, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew the tax collector, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon, and Judas.

While the list contains one or two slight variations between the three accounts, none of them stray from what Roman Catholic tradition has since emphasized: Jesus exclusively chose *men* to comprise his priesthood of twelve, which is why only men can serve as priests in the Catholic Church up to the present day.

We all know, as I said, that Jesus had twelve disciples.

What we may *not know* is that other writings in the New Testament refer to additional disciples of Jesus who never appear among the list of the twelve in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The Gospel of John, for instance, identifies Nathaniel as one of the disciples to whom Jesus appears along the Sea of Tiberius after his death (21:2), even though the earlier Gospels never mention him. His identity remains a mystery.

Another mysterious disciple appears in the Book of Acts. "Now in Joppa," the text says, "there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity" (Acts 9:36-37). This passage is a rare gem. While Paul speaks of a woman named Junia as "notable" or "prominent" among the apostles in Romans 16:7, only here does a writer in the New Testament explicitly call a woman *a disciple of Jesus*.

That's huge!

Like Nathaniel, we know nothing else about Tabitha apart from what the passage tells us. No other book in the Bible refers to her, making her yet another *lost disciple of Jesus Christ*.

## **Making the Grade**

To qualify as one of Jesus' lost disciples, a person in the New Testament must meet **three criteria**: first, the individual in question needs to be identified verbatim as a disciple or follower of Jesus. Second, they can only appear in one of the New Testament's 27 books. Their role in the unfolding mission and ministry of Jesus must largely remain peripheral, which explains how their identity has been "lost."

The third criterion is this: the person must stand out. Their "moment" must confirm their identity as a follower of Christ. Why? Because it raises the question of why the authors of the New Testament did not pay more attention to them – why, in short, they are lost to us as disciples of Christ.

To make the cut, in short, a lost disciple must be identified as a disciple. S/he can only appear in one of the New Testament's 27 writings, and something significant must happen that reinforces the person's importance and connection with Christ.

Consider the story of Tabitha. Acts 9:36 labels her a **disciple**; however, she exists on the periphery of the Jesus story insofar as she **appears nowhere else** in the entire New Testament. When she encounters the inner circle of Jesus' disciples, the twelve, Peter implicitly **confirms her importance** to the story by bringing her back to life. Oddly enough, however, we hear nothing about her afterwards.

Tabitha is not alone. In our Gospel reading for today, we meet another **lost disciple of Jesus**.

His name is Bartimaeus.

## The Details

Jesus and his disciples (presumably the twelve) meet Bartimaeus on the road through Jericho to Jerusalem. The setting is significant. As Luis Menendez-Antuña of the Boston University School of Theology observes, “The passage [begins and] ends with a compelling description of Christian discipleship built on wordplay. Whereas the miracle starts with Bartimaeus ‘sitting on the side of the road’ (10:46), it ends with the new disciple ‘walking, following Jesus on the road’ (10:52)” (*Working Preacher*, accessed 10/21/21).

Notice the language here: Antuña identifies Bartimaeus as a person who becomes a *disciple* of Jesus, one – as Mark says – who “followed him on the way” (10:52). This means he will presumably use the gift of sight Jesus has given him to help others, to serve as he has been served.

Bartimaeus accordingly meets the first criterion. Mark identifies him as a follower of the Way on the way with Jesus to Jerusalem. But what else can we say? What else do we know about him?

The text offers us just a few details, all of which are significant. Check out his name. In Aramaic, which was the primary language Jesus spoke, it means “son of the unclean,” “son of contamination,” or “son of pollution.” These phrases correspond to Bartimaeus’ condition, at least as it was understood by Jews at the time.

More than once, biblical Judaism assumed blindness was punishment from God (cf., Exodus 4:11). While Torah prohibited the Israelites from mistreating blind people, it also prohibited the blind from performing sacrifices to God if they belonged to the priestly tribe (*HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, p. 99).

By healing Bartimaeus, Jesus shows us that, in fact, **God doesn’t punish people by causing them to suffer from a physical**

**disability like blindness.** Instead, God makes His will known in and through Jesus who heals and restores Bartimaeus to fellowship with others and who reverses his status as a sign of God's emerging upside-down kingdom.

Jesus does something else, too.

In healing Bartimaeus, he expresses in deed what he will affirm in word according to the Gospel of John: blindness, like any other medical condition or physical disability, *does not come from the Lord!* It is not punishment for sin (cf. John 9:1-3). Bartimaeus is not unclean, which takes us to the second meaning of his name: as a Greek-Aramaic hybrid, it can also be translated as "son of honor" or "honorable son." That's obviously a far-cry from "son of pollution."

### **It All Goes Back to Plato**

Several hundred years before Jesus, the Greek philosopher Plato wrote *Timaeus*, a short treatise with the "humble" aspiration of explaining the origins of the cosmos. Note the treatise's name.

Plato bore a high estimation of sight. He understood it to be the foundation of knowledge. In his mind, to "see" meant to grasp, intuit, or comprehend not just trivial details about things *but the fundamental truth of all things*, including the source and ground of our world and everything within it that exists.

Bar-**timaeus** likewise **sees** the truth, although not literally; he sees it spiritually. When he recognizes Jesus as the Son of David, he demonstrates his perceptiveness. He knows Jesus' identity by referring to him as the Son of David. He is the first in Mark's Gospel, moreover, to make such a claim. Here Bartimaeus, a Jew, proclaims Jesus the Messiah!

The crowd responds by ordering him to be quiet which may seem strange. After all, he was praising Jesus. Commentaries tell us, however, that it was against custom to shout at a rabbi. That said,

custom was not an obstacle. Bartimaeus, the blind man, the so-called “son of pollution,” was in fact the “son of honor.” He recognized Jesus; he grasped his identity through a spiritual kind of vision. Jesus cured him in response.

“Immediately,” the story tells us, “he regained his sight and followed [Jesus] on the way” (Mark 10:52).

### **The Verdict**

What, then, makes Bartimaeus a lost disciple? The evidence should now be clear.

Notice first how the story ends. Mark refers to him as a **follower of Jesus**. That fulfills the first criterion, the explicit identification of the person in question as a disciple or follower of Christ.

Consider, secondly, why you may not recall ever hearing of Bartimaeus: he appears by name only in Mark’s version of the story. Luke repeats the account but never gives the beggar a name, and Matthew (who also retells the story) indicates that Jesus healed *two blind men* without reference to the name of either one! The fact that **only Mark mentions Bartimaeus** fulfills the second criterion, namely, that no other writing in the New Testament can mention him.

Observe, finally, how much **Bartimaeus stands out**. Like Tabitha, he undergoes an enormous physical transformation as a confirmation of his faith in Jesus. The result? Jesus aligns Bartimaeus’ capacity to see spiritually with the capacity to see physically.

Next to Tabitha and Nathaniel, therefore, we have in Bartimaeus our **third lost disciple of Jesus**, a follower of the Way whose identity was confirmed by means of a spectacular transformation, yet one who – apart from this single passage – remains a mystery.

## The Implication

We all (think we) know Jesus had twelve disciples, an inner circle of *men* he chose to be his followers. Today, however, the evidence suggests otherwise: a small band of additional disciples has appeared, one that includes *men and women* as well as those who are marginalized due to physical disabilities.

My hope is that this good news. The ELCA has been ordaining women for over 50 years. Sexism, however, continues in our country and in our churches. Tabitha offers us an important example of how the New Testament by contrast affirms *women* in their role as disciples of Jesus Christ. To the young women in our confirmation class especially or to those joining us from SPU: you are just as capable as a man, and when it comes to your calling – whatever that may be – you are just as called as a man.

So, what about Bartimaeus? Sure, Jesus healed him. But what about those who are not healed physically, including people of tremendous faith?

Maybe, it turns out, the story isn't ultimately about being cured of a physical disease. Antuña puts it beautifully: “contemporary interpretations [of this passage in Mark] should focus on the blind man's disposition rather than on the blind man's condition” (*Working Preacher*).

The real healing, in other words, becomes evident in the confirmation Jesus provides of the blind's man faith, a faith now so strong that he “immediately” picked up his cross and followed Christ.

May God give us a measure of faith, and may we be inspired by stories of faith, including those of Jesus and his lost disciples.

Amen.