

Ok, I have a question for you. How many of you are planners? You know what I mean? I'm a planner so let's see how many of you can relate to this:

Do you love, I mean love, creating your to-do list each morning? Maybe with your coffee. I mean that's like the perfect way to start a day, right?

And when you go on a trip, you know what is absolutely essential – a detailed itinerary with backup options in case something you'd planned doesn't work out. In fact, I love planning so much, I've been known to create imaginary itineraries for trips that I'm not going on, but the planning is half the fun so if I make an itinerary about an imaginary trip, it's like I got half a vacation.

Now, as planners, we also can have some pet peaves...like situations that require spontaneity. I mean I literally had to write a script ahead of time to ask my now wife out for the first time so the thought of spontaneously approaching someone....nope.

And the other pet peave is interruptions...especially when I'm in the zone knocking items off my to-do list. Ok, anyone still able to relate?

But for some of us, that's a real problem. Especially for someone like me whose job is to work with people. When I first became a pastor, my church was a new church start and our office and my church was housed in a faith-based non-profit. And right next door to my office was a long time minister named Mike Harper. Now Mike was an extreme extrovert. He would talk to anybody. He would tell the same stories over and over again. And Mike interrupted me a lot. He would walk into my office and I'd be working on a sermon or our newsletter or something else that I thought was important and Mike would just start talking.

And I would get fidgety. I would start tapping my foot. I'd start stealing glances at my watch. And I don't know if Mike noticed or if he just didn't care but he would just hang out in my office as long as he wanted to. And for a while this really frustrated me, but slowly, I noticed something about Mike. People would go into his office all the time. Clients coming to the nonprofit. Church members. Other staff. They just walked in and Mike always jumped up to greet them. Sometimes they'd say something like, "I'm sorry to interrupt you, but..." And before they could finish, Mike would cut them off and say, "Interruptions are my business. Have a seat. Have a seat."

I wanted to tell you about Mike because the way he responded to people needing him reminds me of how I see Jesus responding in the gospel stories. In the chapter our Scripture was from – Mark 10 – Jesus gets interrupted over and over again. I don't know what Jesus had planned or if he even made plans at all – the story doesn't tell us – but I'm sure that if Jesus did have plans, he never got around to it. The chapter began with him teaching and someone interrupting him with a theological question. It'd be like I have my sermon all prepared and ready to go and one of you saying, "Actually, I'm not interested in what you'd planned to talk about today. Instead we want you to preach about..." And Jesus obliges.

Then a whole bunch of parents want Jesus to bless their kids and he's suddenly swarmed by them. And the disciples try to turn the kids away, thinking Jesus has more important stuff to do, but Jesus won't hear it. "Let the kids come to me," he says.

Then another person interrupts him with a theological question. After that, he has to be bothered with his disciples getting into an argument about which one of them is the greatest. I have to think even Jesus must have been annoyed by this interruption.

And then finally, we have our story we read today. Jesus had been in the city of Jericho and he, along with a whole lot of people, are leaving Jericho to make the journey to Jerusalem. The reason so many people were leaving Jericho at the same time is because they were pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem to observe Passover, one of the most important events for the Jewish people. Passover is when they remembered God delivering the Jews from slavery in Egypt. But for Jesus, this journey meant something else. This would be the last trip Jesus would ever make. When he arrived into Jerusalem, the crowds greeted him with Palm branches – an occasion we still commemorate on Palm Sunday. He would eat his last supper with his disciples. He would be arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, beaten, and crucified.

In the Gospel of John, the writer tells us that Jesus knew exactly what was going to happen when he arrived in Jerusalem. He knew that he was in essence a dead man walking. The gospel of Mark is not as clear as to how much Jesus knows but all the gospels seem to agree that, at the very least, Jesus knew that something was going to go down in Jerusalem. There was going to be a confrontation between him and the Empire.

Now I think this context is important because it tells us something about what Jesus' mental state must have been. He's in a huge crowd of people...all trying to get out of the city. He at least knows that Jerusalem will be a place of danger for him, if not certain death, and surely that must be weighing on him heavily. If there's any time when Jesus would want to not be interrupted, to not be bothered, this would be it. He has enough going on.

But that doesn't stop Bartimaeus from calling out to him, "Have mercy on me." And who can blame him, right? He doesn't know what's about to happen in Jerusalem. All he knows is that he needs help...and not just physical healing. You see, in that day, it was thought that if you were blind, or had any other disability, it was the result of your sin or the sin of your parents. In other words, you deserved your plight. One of the things Jesus did over and over again was to challenge that dangerous and harmful theology. And Bartimaeus must have heard about all that Jesus had done.

So he cries out, "Have mercy." Now a minute ago, I said, "Who could blame him?" He needed help. Well, it turns out a lot of people blamed him. The Scripture tells us that many people in the crowd sternly ordered him to be quiet. Think about the scene for a minute. Imagine we're walking together in a crowd of people and we see a beggar on the side of our route asking for help and all of a sudden people in the crowd start shouting at him,

“Shut up.”

“Get a job”

“You’re nothing. Who do you think you are.”

Can you imagine how intimidating, how scary that must have been for Bartimaeus? I think it’s worth pausing for just a moment to recognize the sheer courage he had in asking for help. So often we think these healing stories are only about the amazing stuff that Jesus does, but I think they are equally about the incredible bravery and courage of those asking for help because they are having to speak up in the context of a culture that tells them they should shut up.

And while we live in a very different time and place, we also live in a culture that, at least implicitly, tells us we should be able to take care of ourselves. One takeaway I hope we can learn from Bartimaeus is that asking for help when we need it is not weak. It’s actually really brave.

In fact, Bartimaeus was so brave that after the crowd told him to be quiet, he started yelling even louder for help. He realized this may be his one chance to find healing and he wasn’t going to let anyone stop him.

And Jesus heard him. And I don’t know whether it was because of the persistence of Bartimaeus or the compassion of Jesus – probably both – that Jesus, with everything weighing on his mind and with the crowd rushing him forward, stopped and allowed himself to be interrupted one more time before he would travel to Jerusalem for the last week of his life.

So what does this story mean for us?

I think we actually have two people in the story we would do well to emulate. Like Bartimaeus, we can also have the courage to ask for help when we need it. None of us are isolated units but we are connected to one another, so much so, that the Apostle Paul tells us that the church is like a body where if one member suffers, all suffer together and if one member rejoices, all rejoice together. When you feel that you’re at the end of your line and don’t know where else to turn, remember that you have a church that you can call on.

And the reason we can offer that gift of community to each other is because we look to Jesus who always was ready to be interrupted by people who needed him, even in the most stressful time of his life. One way to interpret that is to think just how amazing Jesus is. Even when he was going to his death, he still could serve others. But another way to interpret it is that being able to help Bartimaeus was exactly what Jesus needed to do not just for Bartimaeus, but for himself also. When I find that I’m really worried or stressed – like I imagine many of us are right now – more times than not the best thing I know to help not feel overwhelmed by that stress is

to do something for somebody else. It helps me break that doom loop that goes around and around in my head.

It's helped me understand that interruptions can actually be a gift....even for planners like me.