

# *There's No God like God, and There's No People Like the Church*

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Jeremiah 31:7-9; Mark 10:46-52  
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church  
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There is no God like God, and there's no people like the church. When biblical scholars talk about certain Bible passages, where God asks, with rhetorical force, "Who is like me?" they talk about the *incomparability of God*. There is no God who is like God. God is incomparable. And in a derivative fashion, the church is also incomparable. There is no people like the church.

But before we begin to get a big head about our incomparability, we should realize what we mean when we say this. Texts like Jeremiah 31 and our little story from Mark 10 explain why there is no people like the church, and some may not find this to be exactly flattering at first. Jeremiah 31 describes the community of faith as a "remnant," which is to say, the part of a community that is left after a disaster, and the remnant, according to Jeremiah 31:8, will come from the north, 'among them the blind and the lame.' That is to say, the remnant of the faith community will not mostly be composed of the rich and the famous, but of the poor and the vulnerable. For it turns out that God does not need the huge and the powerful to have an impact on the world. Jesus said that his followers are like a little pinch of yeast that, by the grace and love of God, is more than enough to leaven the whole loaf. There are echoes here of how the anthropologist Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." God does not need a team full of superstars to change the world. God is ready to do that with the blind and the lame, with a group of 12 fishermen, with beggars, with the poor in spirit, with the little people, the people in our community who get overlooked, the parts of ourselves that we would like to overlook, God uses all of those to accomplish God's purposes.

No other god does that. Other gods, in their anxiety and hungry desire for control, need giants and heroes and superstars. They value the successful and the winners. Other gods only care about people's accomplishments and achievements, as 1 Samuel 16 puts it, they look on the outward appearance, but our God looks on the heart. No other god does that.

In Mark 10, we are given a story about Bartimaeus, a blind and possibly homeless beggar, who in this text becomes the actual paradigm for discipleship. No other god in our world is going to make a paradigm out of a blind beggar. But our God does.

My wife, Laura, says this may just be her favorite passage in the entire Bible. According to this text, the church is built out of people like Bartimaeus. No other people is like that. No other club is like that. Other clubs want shiny, successful people as their members. Kickball team captains always pick the big kids. But Jesus comes for the ones who are picked last. No other Lord does that. There's no God like God, and no people like the church.

What we notice about Bartimaeus – the reason that he is a paradigm of discipleship for us – is because of the transformation that is wrought in him by Jesus. In this story, Bartimaeus moves from being a spectator to being a participant. He moves from a place of watching Jesus from the sidelines to a place of following him in the streets. *That's* what we're called to do, too; to move from being a spectator who is glad to cheer Jesus on, to being a full-bodied participant in his kingdom-building mission.

At the beginning of our little text, Bartimaeus is sitting, the text says, 'by the roadside.' The word for 'roadside' is the Greek word *'odos*, which means "the way." You may know that one of the early names for the church is that they were described as being 'people of the Way.' When Acts 9 describes the early Christians as those who "belonged to the Way" (Acts 9:2), the word for that is *'odos*. When Jesus says, in John 14:6 that he is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the word he uses for himself is that he is the *'odos*. So Bartimaeus is sitting beside the way. He is close to it, he is adjacent to it, he can perceive it – even without his physical sight, and he can cheer it on. He is near it, but he is not yet on it. He is not yet *on the way*.

Then he has his encounter with Jesus, this encouraging, healing encounter with Jesus, where Jesus says to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' This is the question that Jesus asks each one of us as individuals, it is a question that he asks us as a congregation, "What do you want me to do for you?" "I want to see," Bartimaeus says. And then, through the mysterious alchemy of his own faith, his own agency, and the power of God at work in Jesus, Bartimaeus regained his sight.

At this point, having experienced the power of Christ in his own body, Bartimaeus gets up, and the text says, "he followed him ... *on the way*." Now Bartimaeus is no longer a spectator. Now he is a participant. He *was* beside the way, but now he is on the way. He comes down out of the stands and he takes his place on the field. He steps off the sidelines and takes his place on the dance floor. Now, if you're anything like me, the dance floor, the field, the arena, can feel like a place where you are exposed, it can be a vulnerable place, where you can fall flat on your faces, where you can get hurt. And sure enough, in the very next verse, Jesus – now with Bartimaeus following him – approaches Jerusalem where he will not only fall on his face, he will be thrown down to the ground, crushed, crucified, dead, and buried. And then, on the third day, he would rise again. This is not the life of a spectator, but of a participant.

Today is the third Sunday of our Stewardship Season. Today is the day when we are inviting each other to move out onto the field and invest our energies and our prayers and our gifts and our resources in the mission and ministry of this congregation. We are living in a remarkable time. We are living in a time when the polarization of our society is reaching ridiculous levels. Friends and families and neighborhoods and communities are being torn apart by this polarizing spirit in which other people are seen, not as neighbors but as enemies. The pain in the world is acute, you can see it in people's eyes, you can hear it in people's voices. Learning how to address and heal the racism that is within us and around us, discovering how to work together to address the ecological disruptions that are upon us. We are living in a remarkable time.

The world would think that the answer to these really big problems would be to assemble a team of superheroes, which may be why we are so fascinated with movies like the Avengers. But God changes the world with a ragtag group of disciples, a group of blind beggars known as the church, people like the apostles Peter, James, and John, people who don't always get along with each other, but who trust the Lord enough to follow him where he leads. The church, including Lewinsville Presbyterian Church, has been created and called "for such a time as this."

This is a remarkable time at Lewinsville. With the calling of Layne Brubaker as our Associate Pastor for Christian Formation, with the renovation of our facility getting closer every week, Lewinsville is poised to make an important impact in the life of this community. Responding to human need, as with Afghan refugees in need of clothing and support, or homebound persons who can now worship via livestream, or young people who find a safe place in youth fellowship where they can just be themselves, or lonely people who receive a call or a visit from a Deacon-Stephen Minister, Lewinsville is changing people's lives.

In order to strengthen and deepen these ministries in the coming year, we are asking the congregation, if you are in a position to do so, to increase your giving to the church by 8-11%. Your investment in the church's ministry will enable us to leverage our new facility as well as our staff's leadership to expand and deepen our impact. This will mean that the pandemic has not been a time for this congregation to curl up and simply try to get by, but to stand up and lean into the needs of this community in real ways.

Friends, there is no God like God, and there's no people like the church. It is a wonderful time to be part of the church. The winds of the world may be turbulent, but stormy weather has always been part of the package. As our own Anne Schwartz often says, "God never promised us a smooth flight, just a safe landing." Our God is the only God who builds a team out of the remnant, out of the blind and the lame, out of blind beggars like Bartimaeus, people with flaws and confusions and failures, people like me and like you. God is doing a new thing right under our noses, and we get to be part of it. To God and to God alone, be all the glory, now and forever. Amen.