

Mark 10:46-52 “Nobody Listens to Silence”

I don't know if you've ever noticed, but justice rarely comes to those who are silent. I think this is especially true when someone is being silenced by a persons in power. Tuesday I read a story on my newsfeed about three Bay Area Catholic diocese who participated in a huge “institutional cover-up” by allowing 263 local priests *who were known sexual predators* to continue serving in congregations in the same region. And, as we know, this isn't the first time institutional cover-ups involving predatory clergy has happened. Last year, Faith and Films watched and discussed the movie *Spotlight* which is about a team of reporters from the Boston Globe who uncovered a large-scale, decades long cover-up in Boston in the 1990s. How did these cover ups come to light? Victims came forward and said, “Enough. What happened to me should not happen to *any* child.” And as we learned from watching this movie, the highest Church officials in the region were able to keep these secrets in the shadows by providing protection for the offending clergy. How? By silencing the victims.

Last year, the **#metoo** movement opened people's eyes to the same sort of institutional cover-ups in the movie industry. In the past, victims who came forward were silenced. That is, until some brave souls who knew they may be jeopardizing their careers said, “I will not *be* silenced.” **#metoo** seems to have encouraged other victims who have been silenced to come forward in other arenas including the highest levels of our government.

Violence and abuse aren't just limited to institutions. It happens in families too. We've seen a rise in the number of victims of domestic abuse who have come forward. But as is the case of institutional cover-ups, it's a person in power who uses threats, fear, shame, and intimidation to keep their victims silent. Again ... this isn't anything new. Vulnerable people have been abused by powerful people for longer than any of us can imagine ... before recorded history. It's part of our sinful nature.

But I'm also here this morning to tell you that there are other types of silencing that don't have criminal overtones but they're still difficult to deal with. Many people find themselves pressured to keep silence if they start expressing a wish to break free from conforming to their current social situation. Here's an example – Have you ever been the first person in your family to cross over to a different religion? We had an interesting testimony at the Interfaith Council dessert last week from a woman who started out Episcopalian but then converted to Islam. Ever been the first person in a family of meat-eating game hunters to become a vegetarian? Ever been the first person in your family to cross political party lines? If you can believe it, I knew a number of people in my first church in rural Virginia who were subjected to all sorts of ridicule and hostility when they aspired to be the first person from their family to go to college. It was as though everyone around them took their aspiration as a personal insult. “What ... are you too good for us now? Are you trying to get above your raising? We don't want to hear it. You keep your education and your snooty, high-falootin', condescending ways to yourself.”

I also know a number of people at the *other* end of the socio-economic scale who faced similar ridicule when they climbed to the top of the corporate ladder then decided that it wasn't worth it and went back to a simpler life. The abuse, especially from those who were still on the way up was often quite ferocious. “How dare you question the value of what the rest of us are still reaching for!” “What ... you a quitter? A loser? Can't take the pressure? We don't want to hear it. You keep your hippie-dippie ways to yourself.”

What's that old song, “Sit Down You're Rocking the Boat?” What's sad is that being silenced sometimes doesn't even *require* someone threatening you or shouting you down. You don't need someone *actively* trying to silence you to feel the pressure to keep quiet. Why do you think some of us don't speak up when we see an injustice? Because we fear what someone *might* do or say or think. It's a hard place to be.

Today's gospel gives us the story of Bartimaeus, a blind beggar from Jericho, who was by the roadside asking Jesus for mercy. Let's take a look at where this story fits into Mark's gospel. This story takes place in what I call "The Disciples Just Don't Get It" section. Jesus tries to teach his disciples about what the reign of God is all about, and they keep getting it wrong. And this isn't the first time we've seen the disciples trying to silence people who just want to see Jesus. Remember a couple of weeks ago when we talked about the disciples trying to silence the "unauthorized exorcist?" And Jesus said, "Hey, if the guy is on our side and getting the job done, why are you trying to shut him up?" And this was right after the disciples tried to stop some children from getting close to him. Jesus said, "Don't try to keep them away from me! You've got a lot to learn from these kids. In fact, if you want to be a part of God's reign, then you need to be more like little kids!" And before that, *Peter* was trying to shut *Jesus* up when he started talking about the inevitability of his crucifixion. That didn't go so well for Peter because Jesus got mad at him and called him "Satan."

And now here's poor, blind Bartimaeus, someone who immediately recognized Jesus for who he was ... the Son of David ... the Messiah. Bart caught Jesus on the way to Jerusalem where he'd eventually be crucified. Bart said, "Have mercy on me." And "many sternly ordered him to be quiet." But he cried out even *more* loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" And Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." So what's going on here? Why are these followers of Jesus trying to silence him?

Well, there's probably no one simple answer that explains it all. A lot of folks have suggested that it was because Bartimaeus was considered a nobody, and the crowd didn't want a "nobody" interrupting somebody important like Jesus. "Bart, stay in your place and shut up. He's got more important things to do than listen to nobodies like you!" I *also* wonder whether this is like the "cleanups" that happen before an event like the Olympic Games. Cities try to get the beggars off the streets because it's socially awkward to have our important overseas guests

seeing that we've got poor, desperate people in our wannabe perfect society. So maybe it was like, "Let's keep these people out of sight so they don't spoil Jesus's view of our beautiful city. So Bart ... you get on out of here because you're making the city look bad."

But mostly I wonder whether the attempts to silence Bartimaeus are a bit more like some of the silencings that some of *us* experience when we try to turn our lives around and break with the status quo. Think about this — The gospel writer is lifting up Bartimaeus as the model disciple in this story ... the one who gets it and shows us what it really looks like to have our eyes opened and follow Jesus. "Well look at him. Isn't he just a teacher's pet. Isn't he just the model of perfection." Maybe there's a part of us that doesn't want to allow this model to be seen, or heard. Ever been the new person on the job and the old-timers say, "Don't you work too hard and make the rest of us look bad!" Same applies here. We might not be entirely happy with our lives. And sure, we might yearn for something more, but we're kind of hoping that it might be more like an "add-on" than complete break with the status quo.

When someone starts calling out for more radical change, and then models this message that we really need to take Jesus a whole lot more seriously, we don't want to hear it. "Shut up, Bart. Nobody wants to hear your holier-than-thou, 'I get what Jesus is saying more than the rest of you' routine. We're doing okay here. Clearly we're fans of Jesus. We're here in the crowd, cheering him on, trying to keep riff-raff *like you* out of his way." We'll sing our songs and wave our bibles and shout his name, but we don't need anyone suggesting that it's not really what following Jesus is about. We don't want anyone making it look like we're still blind to what Jesus really wants us to see. We've learned to cope and put up with all the little toxic bits of our present reality. We've learned to play the game so we can get our house and a decent car and a few little comforts in life. We make it to church on Sundays. Most Sundays. Okay, some Sundays. We're keeping our heads above water in difficult times. But we don't need anyone breaking ranks, being a

teacher's pet and showing how ... *shallow* we may be. So just shut up Bart.

But Bartimaeus will not be silenced. He knows his need, and he knows that in Jesus he has met the only one who can *meet him in that need* and lead him on the way to freedom. So Bart calls out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" And Jesus stops on the spot and says, "Call him here." Jesus steps through the attempts to silence Bartimaeus and invites him to follow on the way of life.

If the call for life and freedom inside you is being silenced – whether it's because you're being ridiculed by others, or whether it's because of your own fears or uncertainties – if you'll speak up anyway and call out to Jesus, willing to have your eyes opened and your life turned around, Jesus will stop for you too. Nothing else is too important, and no one is going to be silenced or shooed away. Jesus will welcome you and all who call out. He'll stop and ask you, "What do you want me to do for you?" And you might say, "Teacher, let me see ... let me *really* see ... let me 'be woke!'" At that point, there's a high likelihood, and I'm talking a *really* high likelihood, that your request will be granted and nothing will ever be the same again. You'll see and hear the truth that so many are intent on covering up and silencing, and you'll see that the path of freedom leads on in the footsteps of Jesus, all the way to the cross and beyond into the wide open spaces of God's love and life. "Teacher, we want to *see* and follow you on the way."