



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Are Smart People More Holy?

SCRIPTURE:
Mark 10:46-54

March 27, 2022 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

People live in a larger culture. There are many different cultures. But everyone lives in *some* culture. And we can see cultural differences.

I was having lunch with a friend and somehow we got on the subject of extended family. He said, “Yeah, my brother’s wife... she’s crazy.” “Really?” I asked. “Oh, yeah. We just can’t figure her out. Of course, she’s from the South. You know how crazy southerners can be.” I said, “Yeah, I have some insight.” We all have our culture.

It seems to me that every Christian, when looking at their own culture from a perspective of faith, has two responsibilities. There is a responsibility to love your place—to embrace your culture. To celebrate what is good about the way you do things at home. But there is a second responsibility. Sometimes faith raises questions about our culture, about how we are with one another, about values that we care about, about judgments we make. Every Christian—at the same time—embraces his or her culture but also questions their culture.

If I understand the story of the healing of Bartimaeus, we find Mark’s congregation questioning an aspect of the Greek culture in which they were living. The objection is not about issues such as the treatment of slaves or the role of women... things like that. Although Christian faith challenges those aspects of culture. If I understand it, this text calls into question a basic Greek assumption of what it means to be a human being.

There was a blind man who called out to Jesus, “Son of David, have mercy on me.” When he calls, Jesus’ followers told him to stop. ‘Don’t bother Jesus.’ Why? As one scholar has put it, Jesus is too important to be distracted. He is, as Peter said, the

Messiah. And the Messiah can’t be bothered by an impoverished beggar.¹ That was the culture.

But Jesus sees this differently. “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asks. “My teacher, my rabbi,” he says, “Let me see. I want to see. I thought I could see, but I want to see again.”

There is something striking here: Mark tells us the blind man’s name. Jesus heals a lot of people in Mark’s gospel—but we have never learned their names. Not a single time, until now. I think that means the name is not only important, but the story is about the name.

His name is Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus. To say it that way is repetitive. In Aramaic, the language that Jesus would have spoken, ‘bar’ means ‘son.’ So Bartimaeus translates ‘son of Timaeus.’ Our text says his name is “Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus,” once in Aramaic, and then a second time in Greek. After an entire gospel of not sharing a single name of anyone healed, like double speedbumps in the road, we get the name twice: Son of Timaeus, Son of Timaeus. Mark wants to make sure not only that we know his name, but that his name is the *point*.

Why? Timaeus is not a common name—at least not among Jews. But it was a well-known name in Greek culture.

About 400 years before Mark writes his gospel, Plato wrote a dialogue in which he describes the human condition—what it is to be human. The name of the dialogue is “Timaeus.”

In “Timaeus,” Plato says the characteristic that makes us human is the capacity to think—reason is what makes us human. Plato believes that reason comes from observation—from seeing the world. In “Timaeus,” Plato writes, “Sight in my opinion is the greatest benefit to us... from this, we have derived

1 M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: New Testament Library* (2006), p. 305.

philosophy and... no greater good ever was or ever will be given by the gods to mortals.”

And as far as those who are not as bright as Plato, he says, “Why should I even talk about them?”² They are not worth the great philosopher’s breath.

Plato got more specific in his ranking of human beings. I’m being a bit simplistic here, but not too much. Plato said there are people of ‘golden souls.’ They are the ones who think great thoughts and shape cultural life. There are also people of ‘silver souls.’ (Think of this like Olympic medals.) They are warriors and such; they provide great service to the city. And then there are ‘bronze’ people; they exist to serve the more important folks. Slaves, immigrants, servants. Plato said that the epitome of the gold-souled people were (not surprisingly, for a philosopher): philosophers. All are human, but they don’t share the same status; some are more human than others. What Plato observed is undeniable. People do have different gifts.

When we lived in Florida, we would often go to the the Players Championship golf tournament nearby. I was standing at the number 11 Tee Box. It’s a long par five and you need a good drive to reach the green in two. Around the tee boxes, they have ropes about waist-high to keep the crowds at a safe distance from the golfers. You are close enough to see their sweat and hear their conversation, but not so close that you get hit in the head.

Scott Hoch was in the group I was watching. He hit his tee shot and it went way out there but then he said, “Shucks (or something like that), I missed it.” Well, he didn’t miss it. He just didn’t hit it square, so it didn’t go as far as he wanted. Someone in the crowd said, “Well, I’d take that drive any day of the week.” Scott Hoch said, “That’s why you are on that side of the rope.”

True enough. When it comes to golf, there are folks inside the rope and there are folks outside. Gifts are not distributed equally. I will never hit a golf ball like Scott Hoch, I will never sing like Dreshon or play the oboe like Ann Sneller. We have different gifts. Plato was not wrong about that.

2 These quotes, as well as the connection between Mark and Plato, are found in: Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (2003) p. 28.

3 Adrian Woolridge, *The Aristocracy of Talent* (2021) p. 1.

4 Woolridge, p. 13.

5 Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit* (2020) p. 25.

But Plato offered judgment on which gifts made us important—which gifts made us human. For him, the philosopher was the greatest of humans. And for those who lacked great intellect, he didn’t say they were unintelligent; he said, they were blind. There is a lot of Plato’s thinking alive today.

Adrian Woolridge, in his book, “The Aristocracy of Talent,” argues that the closest thing we have to a governing ideology in American culture is what he calls meritocracy.³ It’s a word coined in the late 1950s by sociologist Michael Young who was trying to name the force that allows social mobility to occur in a free society. Woolridge argues that in western society, we admire athletic talent, and for a gifted few, we pay a lot for it. We admire artistic talent, and for a gifted few, we pay a lot for it. But for most of society, he says the “defining human quality” is intelligence.⁴ He sounds like Plato.

Michael Sandel, who teaches philosophy at Harvard, offers this reflection. He says not only does meritocracy justify some people being on top and others being on the bottom—something of a Darwinian survival of the fittest—but Sandel argues that, like Plato, we have attached status. Those on top have more merit; those on the bottom do not. Humanity is ranked.⁵

I was in a conversation with one of you who volunteers at our Food Pantry and she said, “I love this ministry. I love it because the people are so grateful.” But then she said, “But it can be hard, too, because sometimes, just below the surface of that gratitude, is an undeniable shame.”

Sandel claims that shame comes from the cultural lesson that if you are not successful, you are a lesser person. There are people of gold souls, but you are not one of them. Maybe Woolridge and Sandel make sense to you; maybe they don’t. But what seems real to me is that every culture has developed a way of determining who matters and who doesn’t.

This is where the rubber hits the road with Timaeus. Bartimaeus, a son of Plato, asks Jesus, a son of David, “I am the philosopher... is it not my intelligence that makes me worthy? Or am I missing

something? Do I have a blind spot?"

Our son Nathan was living in New York City when he decided that he and a friend were going to take the summer off and walk the Camino de Santiago, which is a pilgrimage across northern Spain. He saved his nickels and bought his ticket. But he needed some help. He had some house plants that needed care while he was away. A buddy at work said that he'd be glad to help. Nathan carried the first plant to work, it was small, so his buddy could take it home. But he told him that the other plant was bigger... I better bring it to your apartment. He carried the second plant to the subway. He got on the subway and said he noticed that people on the train kept looking at his house plant. He rode from Manhattan to Brooklyn, then walked the rest of the way to his friend's apartment.

When he got there, his friend said, "You want me to take care of that?" "Yes, thanks." "You've got to be kidding, right?" "What do you mean?" "Nathan, it's dead. The plant is dead." My son is colorblind. He can't distinguish brown leaves from green leaves. He laughed as he remembered those folks looking at him on the subway... wondering why he was carrying a dead plant in his lap. For weeks, he had been watering a dead plant.

Sometimes we think we see things clearly, but we have a blind spot. But my son, and Bartimaeus, know it. Bartimaeus, son of Plato, asks, "What am I missing? I am so smart. I am the son of Timaeus, the Philosopher. God gave me my mind. Doesn't using it set me apart? Set me above?"

Jesus says, "No, you aren't human because you are smart. You are human when you love." Now, Jesus wasn't anti-intellectual. We have been pondering the wisdom of his teachings for generations. I am amazed at the brilliance of Mark's gospel and most consider Mark the least sophisticated gospel writer.

This is not a rejection of the stewardship of the mind but an ordering. According to the Gospel, the use of the mind is not to set us apart; reason lives in service to love. All gifts are to be used in the service of love. Jesus quotes the Torah: "We are to love... to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength." All gifts are to be used in the service of love.

Every culture develops ways to designate who really matters and who doesn't. In the conversation before Jesus heals Bartimaeus, his disciples ask Jesus, "Do you think we are great? Do you think we are important?"

Jesus says, "Let me tell you this: I didn't come to be served. I didn't come to be a gold-souled person. I came to be a servant. Not because I am lesser, but because the cultural systems of status-making are a lie. There are no unimportant people to God." That truth challenges every culture, which means it challenges every Christian as well. There are no unimportant people to God. God loves all—and it is in loving all that we become human.

It's seldom the way we see the world, but that's because everyone has blind spots from time to time. But Bartimaeus shows us, if we want it, sometimes our eyes can be opened.