

The Healing of Bartimaeus

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“What do you want me to do for you?”

It’s a question that I often forget to ask. I tend to charge in certain of what the need is and ... Well, most of the time it goes fine. But not always. Last year, I came home from leading a retreat that hadn’t gone as expected. Even though I had prepared extensively, I never felt like I “hit the target” with this particular group. The retreatants were restless, disengaged, distant. When I told my husband about the experience on the way home from the airport, he was sympathetic. He then asked, “What had the planning team said they were looking for from you?” In retrospect, I am not sure that I listened well enough in the planning process to find out.

I sometimes fear that if Bartimaeus had encountered me on the road from Jericho he may have ended up with five dollars in his pocket. I may have assumed what he wanted and neglected to inquire.

But Jesus doesn’t presume, even though He is God-on-Earth. Even though He is Knowledge Incarnate. Even though the man standing before him is clearly blind. Before doing anything for Bartimaeus, Jesus first asks, “What do you want me to do for you?”

The Catholic tradition clearly values the doing of good in the world. It has created a vast network of schools and hospitals and social service clinics. It funds development projects and relief services and crisis centers. The halls of our sponsored institutions are congested with generous and well-educated doctors and nurses, teachers and social workers, builders and financiers. Yet at the heart of all our service efforts as a Church lies a profound, foundational commitment to human dignity: “What do *you* want us to do for you?” We can’t presume to know what others want in any given situation without pausing first to ask.

Sometimes those conversations – like the one that Jesus had with Bartimaeus today – are simple and joyous. Jesus asks, “What do you want me to do for you?” and Bartimaeus replies that he wants sight. This is something Jesus (because he is Jesus) is able and happy to provide.

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But sometimes those conversations are much more complicated. Because sometimes the kind of healing a person truly desires is beyond what we (who are not Jesus) have the capacity to make happen. And then we are faced with even more complicated, painful conversations: What do you do when a beloved grandmother is in need of further cancer treatment to stay alive, but says, “No more chemo. I’m done.” What do you do when a brother with schizophrenia decides he wants to go off his meds? When a daughter with addiction issues wants to check herself out of a treatment facility after only a few days and to move back home with you?

How do we still honor the dignity of people to make their own choices about what they want in terms of their health and wellbeing, while at the same time be true to our own values and honest about our concerns?

We are, of course, not the first people in the history of the Church to be asking these questions. Indeed the Church’s bishops and theologians are always wrestling with how to apply core Gospel values in the midst of the real world we live in.

Today, I want to mention just one resource available to us as Catholics to help navigate those conversations that seem so much more complicated than the one Jesus had with Bartimaeus, and yet are nevertheless very real and part of our lives as disciples. This resource is called the *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services* and it is updated by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops every couple of years in order to keep abreast of technological changes that are always being made in the area of health care. The most current edition can easily be found online on the bishop’s website.

The 72 “ERDs”—as they are commonly known—are primarily intended to guide Catholic health care providers in the decisions that they must make on a daily basis. But these directives can also be a resource for us in conversations with family and close friends. They cover things we should all be thinking and talking about regarding when to pursue treatment and when to stop it, when to continue seeking a cure and when opt for comfort care. And they always leave space for that core Gospel question Christ wants us to ask each and every person in times of profound need: “What do *you* want us to do for you?”

None of us knows when we will *need* to be having conversations of this nature. We like to think of illness as something in the distant future and accidents as remote possibilities ... and hopefully they are. But there is no need to wait to have conversations until a time of crisis. Indeed, it is a good thing to have talked with each other well in advance about what one’s own wishes are regarding health care when a cure does not seem possible.

I invite everyone in this congregation over the age of 18 to have a Jesus-and-Bartimaeus conversation this week. And what I mean by that is this: Talk with at least one person you are really close to about what you would want done for you at the end

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of your life, and ask them what they would want you to do for them. If you end up having questions in the midst of this conversation, that you are stymied by and want more information about what the Church teaches, you can call the nearest Catholic hospital and ask to talk to someone in the Pastoral Care department. Chaplains are well trained to help people think through these conversations and happy to help. We don't often have conversations of this nature with each other, but in order to really be able to honor each other's dignity in a time of grave need, it is important that we know. It is one very concrete way that we can imitate Jesus in our daily life – just by asking, "What would you want me to do for you?"

CHA has two documents that might help in conversations about end-of-life: ***Caring for People at the End of Life*** and ***Expressing Your Health Care Wishes***. Find them at www.chausa.org/ethics/overview.

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