



June 22, 2014
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Undercover Boss: Sidelined

Mark 10: 46-52

Your pastors and three elders just returned from General Assembly, our denomination's annual meeting. And by the way, for those of you who saw some disturbing headlines this week about Presbyterians, we are **not** them! We are the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and our General Assembly was a combination of revival meeting and family reunion... with a little business thrown in! It is such a blessing to be with 1500 people who share a passion for Christ and a heart to reach the world. What a gift to be in a denomination that treasures God's Word and seeks to obey it!

This year's GA was in Knoxville, Tennessee, so we had the double blessing of returning to Pastor Megan's old stomping grounds. We flew into Nashville, had dinner at B.B. King's and then drove to Chattanooga where the Hackmans went to college. We took a seven-mile bike tour of the city... in 95 degree weather! But I needed it! Those southerners... they don't exactly cook low-cal! For example, I had dry rub ribs, fried pickles, shrimp and grits, catfish po'boy and the biggest slab of carrot cake ever! I even learned the five southern food groups: lard, butter, cream, sugar and fried.

We also visited the places where Megan and Larry worked while at school. The bed and breakfast they served as indentured slaves and the coffee shop where Megan was a barista. Each stop included stories of fun times, hard work and gratitude for their present careers.

We've been talking a lot about work these last weeks. God created us to work... and when things go right with our work, the world thrives and Jesus is glorified. But things don't always go right in this broken world. And this morning, I want to talk about what it's like to be "sidelined;" to be unemployed or underemployed. If that doesn't describe you, that's okay; listen up anyhow. Because there are a lot of your brothers and sisters here this morning that are in that boat and who need our love and support and prayers.

I want to return briefly Ellis' strong message from last week. You'll remember James and John were trying to manipulate Jesus into giving them positions of power in his kingdom... to sit at his right and left hand. Do you remember Jesus' reply? "The rulers of this world lead with authority and intimidation. We don't do that." Then comes the most memorable leadership principle Jesus ever uttered: "For even the Son of man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." We who follow Christ are called to be leaders in our work place not by virtue of power or position, but through the

counter-cultural influence of servant-leadership. We lead by caring for the person on our right and on our left... exactly the opposite of the career path James and John had mapped out for themselves.

I mention this because this morning we turn to the very next passage in Mark's gospel. And it could not be a more vivid contrast. We go from James and John who are trying to negotiate their corner offices to blind Bartimaeus who is sitting on the curb outside the office building. *[Read Mark 10:46-52]*

Bartimaeus was sidelined. We don't know how he became blind, but we can be sure of this: it was never his dream to be a beggar. Maybe he dreamed of being a farmer or a rabbi or a merchant. We don't know when he lost his sight, but whenever it happened, it meant that his dreams of a different future, a different career, were gone.

Most of you have seen the musical, *Beauty and the Beast*... the story of a self-centered prince who is turned into a monster by a sorceress. Not just him, but his entire staff is transformed into inanimate objects: a clock, a feather duster, a candelabra. The longer the spell endures, the less they are able to do what they once did. They sing about:

"Life is so unnerving for a servant who's not serving; he's not whole without a soul to wait upon. Ah, those good old days when we were useful... suddenly those good old days are gone..." It's a cute and clever song. But not so cute or clever if that describes you—when, for some reason, you cannot do the work you long to do, when you feel like you've been pushed aside... stuck on the bench... forgotten... sidelined!

Two weeks ago I asked you to share your story with me; you who want to work but cannot because of physical limitations or layoffs or whatever. Here are a few of your responses.

In my 50's, I began to lose my vision. I wanted to work but could not. The limitations were stifling... when I moved I lost my credentials. My work was a place for ministry to non-Christians. Consequently, it was a double loss of identity and ministry. I was in a desert for nearly four years... I was laid off-in a nutshell, nobody wants a man in his 50s [when you] can hire kids right out of school and pay them a fraction of what I made. I remember being at the unemployment office and feeling like a big loser... My manager instructed me to do illegal things. I prayed about it and decided to follow the law. I was fired... in the middle of the recession... I feel often like the kid picked last when playing with friends. I have not yet had a job for more than several months even while those younger than me find employment... I have been "underemployed" for almost two years now. I am 51 years old, and have worked since I was 15. It is without a doubt the most frustrating experience I have ever had and I wonder if I just don't fit in anymore....

Those are your painful stories. Many of you here this morning feel like Bartimaeus—sidelined... sitting on the curb... begging for crumbs even as you long to do something meaningful and fulfilling. Your health has stolen your ability to do the job you love... or you

feel as if your career has been stolen from you by the recession or by downsizing or by the dishonesty of your business partner or by a changing industry. How many of you have been sidelined at some point in your career? It stinks, doesn't it? And if you are there and feel unhappy or discouraged or depressed... well, of course you do! You have every right to feel crummy about this. You were created by God to work... and yet, you aren't doing what you sense you were created to do! You don't feel like you are fulfilling your destiny. It is natural to feel sad about that.

A typical Christian response to sorrow or loss is to repress it. Hide it, put on a big smiley face and pretend it's okay. That is phony and destructive and not Christian. There is nothing wrong with acknowledging that you feel lousy about your present work situation. The question is, what do you do about it? How do you move forward?

Bartimaeus teaches us a lot about being sidelined. I think he can help us! First, he teaches us to cry out persistently to Jesus. When Bartimaeus heard Jesus was nearby, he began to shout, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" And when others tried to shush him, he just shouted louder. If you are miserable—if you long for something more in your work life—go ahead! Cry out to Jesus... loudly... persistently... honestly! Beg him for mercy, and when you think he's not listening, cry louder! Don't let Jesus off the hook. There is a parable about a woman who pesters a judge so relentlessly that, finally, he gives her what she wants just to get her off his back! Jesus praises that kind of prayer as a good thing. So get on Jesus' back and stay there! Cry out to Jesus and just keep crying out for mercy until he comes through! That's okay!

Second, if you are on the sidelines right now, be careful whose voices you listen to. Bartimaeus lived in a culture that viewed infirmity as God's judgment. If one was blind, he must have done something wrong, right? A Jewish version of Karma... Bartimaeus and others like him were viewed as sinners! He was blind and penniless because he made God mad. This explains why the crowd was so unsympathetic when Bartimaeus started shouting. Not only did they not help him... they were determined to shut him up and stay in his place! They had all kinds of rude advice for him—advice on what was proper... advice on how he should behave... advice about how he had brought all this upon himself.

I'll bet some of you can relate, right? If you are unemployed or underemployed—if you are seeking government assistance just to help your family survive... if your physical limitations have dragged on for months and years—I'll bet you've heard those voices of judgment and criticism, haven't you? "What did he do wrong? He must not be trying hard enough. He must be lazy. He's too picky. Is she really that sick? He must have really made God mad to go through this..."

If you are on the sidelines, there will be lots of people with lots of opinions and suggestions and even criticisms for you. Now be careful not to dismiss them all; some who know you best and love you most might have some good and hard counsel to offer. But be wise about which voices you listen to. Don't believe the voices that say you are worthless or hopeless

or abandoned by God! If you do, they might intimidate you into keeping your seat on the sideline... never willing to take the risks that you might need to take to get back into the game.

And that would be a third point. Be willing to take some risks! It was risky to disrupt the crowd with his shouts! And when Jesus stopped and called for him, Bartimaeus' behavior got even riskier. Remember, he was blind. He made his living sitting in that spot, wrapped in that robe, receiving the charity of those who pitied him. But when Bart hears that Jesus wants to see him, he throws caution to the wind. He jumps up, casts his cloak aside and allows himself to be led to Jesus.

Think about that for a moment. There were no guarantees for a different future. He didn't know he would be given his sight. He took a risk in abandoning his favorite begging spot and throwing his cloak aside. How would he find it again? How could he be certain a thief might not steal it? No guarantees at all. But he had reached a point of desperation where, when he thought he heard the voice of Jesus, he was ready to risk it all and go for it. If you want to get off the sideline, there might be a time when risky courage is called for. Despite what voices might be saying to you, if you hear the voice of Jesus calling are you prepared to let go of what is familiar—prepared to dump your old ways of doing things—on the chance that Christ might have something new and better for you?

In fact, are you willing to change entirely what you do? Bartimaeus was ready to give up the only thing he was good at—the only thing he thought he could do—on the chance that there might be something different... something better that he had never imagined before. It is possible that what you think is your area of giftedness is, in fact, **not**... that you've been holding onto the wrong dream. It might be that you need to seek trustworthy advice about your own self-assumptions. You may need to do some career testing to find out if, in fact, the "dream job" you are holding out for might be a nightmare. Maybe God wants to reveal a new future to you.

One of our women was working a dead end job with a custom home builder, but it stirred in her a newfound interest. She went back to school and got a degree in interior design. She writes, "I have a passion for what I am doing now, and am excited to see how and where God will use my newly-found work to enrich the world!"

Maybe God, in his grace, is keeping you from the thing you once did because you don't do it as well as you think you do or it isn't as life-giving as you think it might be. Could it be that God has something very different and very much better for you? Now might be the time to take the risk. And it might mean eating humble pie if you are wrong. What if Bart had been wrong? What if he had to go back, fumble around for his cloak and find another spot to beg? It could have been humiliating. But he reached the point where a new future was worth the risk.

Then this: understand that your supreme vocation is to follow Jesus, wherever he might lead! I think there's a reason Mark put these two stories together. They are a stark contrast. James and John wanted to partner with Jesus... they wanted to benefit from their relationship with him by receiving positions of power and authority. But when Jesus healed Bartimaeus and told him, "Go, your faith has healed you," did you notice what he did? He "followed Jesus along the road." He had no idea where Jesus might lead. As it turned out, it led to Jerusalem and the cross. But Bart knew that the only way to real life and real significance—whatever his vocation—was to make sure that Jesus was always in sight. He didn't want to make Jesus his business partner. He wanted to make him the boss and was willing to follow him wherever he led. Maybe your faith in Jesus has never played a significant role in your work life. Maybe your spiritual and secular worlds are separated by your choice! And maybe Jesus wants to change that; wants you to submit to him as Lord over everything... including your job!

And finally, I would say this: however you may feel, you are never sidelined as far as Jesus is concerned! Never sidelined in the work of His kingdom! Think about it. What was Bartimaeus doing when he cried out to Jesus from that curb? He was bearing witness to Christ! "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Every Jew in the crowd knew what he was saying. He was declaring Jesus as Messiah... the Savior... the one who had come in the name of Almighty God. Even as he sat there—kicked to the curb by a society that didn't think him worthwhile—he used that hopeless situation as an opportunity to proclaim to the world who Jesus really was.

Many of you have done the same thing during your "sideline season." One man whose back surgeries left him in chronic pain, unable to work, decided to dedicate himself to the study of God's Word. He started a Bible study that has been going for years. Another man had an accident resulting in a debilitating neurological condition. When he lost his job, he decided to pour himself into the lives of teenagers in this church. Hundreds of kids of been touched by his ministry.

I know that work matters! It is one of the ways we feel productive and valued and significant. But remember our definition of work: work is "doing something with what God gives you so that the world thrives and Jesus is glorified." Even if you are not drawing a paycheck right now—even if it seems that life has kicked you to the curb—in the eyes of Jesus you are not sidelined. Never! Jesus hears your cry as he always heard the cry of the person that society was trying to hush up and push down. He loves you and he thinks you are valuable enough to die for. Who knows what your future might hold, career-wise? But in the meantime, if you decide to turn this season into an opportunity to proclaim to the world the goodness and the power and the love of Jesus—despite your circumstances—you may look back upon this time as some of the greatest work you ever did!

Still, it takes the eyes of faith to see how such a season can be used of God for his glory and purpose. Following this service, I and other leaders will be here to pray for you. If you are out of work or underemployed, we will cry out to the Lord together the prayer of

witness that blind, unemployed, kicked-to-the-curb Bartimaeus shared with the whole world that day: "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
 1. Have you ever been "sidelined" from work? Why? How did that make you feel? If you returned to work, describe that. If not, how have you dealt with this?
 2. Bartimaeus had "friends" who were not very helpful. Describe the role that your friends played in your "sideline" experience.