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## Hearing the Call

### Mark 10:46-52

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on October 28, 2012 by the Rev. Dr. Luke Powery

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I may be a bit late to what's been happening in pop music culture worldwide because of my recent transition to Duke but I am catching up on it now and I've been hearing a lot about "Gangnam style," which is the title of a musical single by South Korean rapper Psy. Gangnam style is a Korean neologism that refers to the hip and trendy lifestyle of the Gangnam district of Seoul, Korea, which is supposedly the Beverly Hills of Seoul. This song was released on July 15, 2012, as the lead single of this rapper's sixth album. Just to give you some sense of the buzz it has created—"Gangnam Style" debuted at number one on the national record chart of South Korea and as of October 23, 2012, the music video has been viewed over 530 million times on YouTube and is the site's third most watched video and most watched Korean pop video. Guinness World Records has indicated that is the most 'liked' video in YouTube history.

There've been numerous parodies and reaction videos to Psy's initial music video. Psy has demonstrated Gangnam style on Saturday Night Live, at Dodger Stadium, on the Ellen Degeneres show, and I'm contemplating whether to invite him here to Duke Chapel for a demonstration with the Chapel choir (I'm just kidding! But if anyone could pull that off, Rodney Wynkoop could!). What's drawn some of the most attention is the song's dance moves which have been performed by different kinds of people all over the world. This musical phenomenon has been drawing and calling people to try out its dance moves. Just last weekend I saw a young man at the Duke football game against UNC doing the "Gangnam style." I did not realize what I've been missing these last few months! Even Google's executive chairman Eric Schmidt, and the British Prime Minister David Cameron, and the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon have been seen dancing "gangnam style"! Who would have thought?! What we expect is not always what we get.

We expect the disciples to have their religious act together with every i dotted and every t crossed, to have every hair in place and to know the exact time to do the sign of the cross. We expect them to do what is right and what is holy and what is just and what is Christ-like. But in last week's passage in Mark, we find something else out about the disciples. They just don't get it. When Jesus asks James and John the same question that rolls off his lips today, "what do you want me to do for you?" we might expect them, disciples of Jesus the Christ, to ask for something admirable and deeply pietistic. Instead, they try to control the boundaries of God's answer by telling Jesus to give them whatever they ask for and what they ask for is to sit at his right and left hand in glory. They want the Trinity to take in two more members and become a Holy Pentagon. They seemed to have been mentored by Joel Osteen's book, *Your Best Life Now*. They want glitz and glamor and prestige and power. Didn't Jesus just predict for a third time his death and resurrection? And the only thing that James and John can worry about is their own glory? Little do they know what they are asking for because as Jesus implies, the irony is that God's glory is gory and his imminent future entails a baptism in blood. The disciples, those who are supposed to be in the know, a part of the gnostic insider clan of Jesus, are actually spiritually blind, blinded by their own ambition. All throughout the book of Mark, the disciples just don't get it. They approach Jesus from a posture of hubris and show us that they don't see straight.

The literary counterpoint this week is the blind beggar, Bartimaeus, who sees rightly. He approaches Jesus with a posture of humility. He asks for mercy as we do in many Sunday services in our communal prayer of confession (Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy). His approach to Jesus is a correction to the distorted discipleship of James and John. Bartimaeus desires to be freed from an affliction; he's not seeking authority or affluence. This man, an outsider in society, usually overlooked in the

community of humanity, and whom people order to be quiet, like the disciples said to him, is the one who models Christian discipleship. The unlikely outsider understands over against the insider-information disciples. Two blind characters in Mark, the man on whose eyes Jesus puts saliva in Mark chapter 8 and Bartimaeus, frame the conversation about discipleship and the blindness of the disciples. These two blind men see with eyes of faith. This is the paradox of the gospel and it should always surprise us because what we expect is not always what we get.

Bartimaeus is blind. The disciples try to mute him. But his sense of hearing is strong. “When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out...” so that Jesus could hear him. I don’t know what he heard. I don’t know if someone said something to Bartimaeus. I don’t know if he heard the shuffle of Jesus’s feet or the tone of Jesus’s voice. I don’t know if there was news coverage about Jesus. As far as I know Jesus was not one of the topics at the presidential debates. But Bartimaeus hears that it is Jesus without any mention of a sound in the biblical text. And because he knows who Jesus is, he cries out loudly for mercy on his misery.

It doesn’t matter to Bartimaeus that Jesus is on a mission. Jesus is leaving Jericho on his way to Jerusalem in the midst of a large crowd to complete his work as Messiah. He’s already predicted his death and resurrection three times! This is a context of impending suffering. In light of this, one might expect that Jesus has more important things to do than to stop to help a blind beggar on 9<sup>th</sup> Street in Durham; Jesus, one might say, has an agenda to save the whole world so why would he stop to help one person! Jesus is concerned with the macro and not the micro, some may say. Well, it is true as one preacher declares, that “[God] is back behind yesterday and... up in front of tomorrow...[God’s] older than time and senior to eternity. [God] was before was was” (Cleo Larue). It is true that God is so wide you can’t get around him and so low you can’t get beneath him, so high you can’t get over him, and so deep you can’t figure him out. It is true that God is transcendent, wonderfully expressed through the Gothic architecture of Duke Chapel, but it is also true that God is immanent, personally present, with us. God is high but stoops low through the Incarnation. Divinity taking on the form of the frailty of humanity. *Kairos* entering *chronos* via *kenosis*. What we expect is not always we get.

Jesus is not just interested in resisting the sociopolitical powers of his day but he also clearly cares for the personal needs of the blind beggar. Jesus does not just love the world. Jesus loves you. You may not want to bother God with what you deem to be a little need in light of the vast needs of an ever-changing global society. You might be wary of falling prey to individualistic and consumeristic religion. I understand this. But even on the way to his own death, even when the trajectory of his missional theology includes a salvific old-rugged cross, Jesus focuses on one person’s need. Right before he meets the blind beggar, he reminds us that he “came not to be served, but to serve.” And serve he does. Jesus understands the personal touch of ministry and asks Bartimaeus, “What do you want me to do for you?” In the other gospel accounts, the blind beggar has no name, but in Mark, we learn his name—Bartimaeus. This is a particular person with a specific need and Jesus calls him. “Call him here...And they called the blind man, saying to him, ‘Take heart; get up, he is calling you.’” Three times the call is emphasized. This story is not just about the healing of a man’s physical sight but it is about hearing the call of Jesus’s voice to us. And if we have spiritual ears to hear, we might be surprised by the deeply personal question Jesus asks, “What do you want me to do for you?”

A personal God asking a personal question to “you.” We hear of many things in the cacophony of current events—partisan political ads as we near election day, hurricane Sandy approaching the east coast, recent suicide bombs outside an Afghan mosque, a Brazilian man showing up alive at his own wake, and Duke botanists naming a newly identified genus of fern after Lady Gaga—but do we hear the call of a God in Jesus who is concerned with our deepest desires? “What do you want me to do for you?” Do you hear the call? “Do you hear what I hear?” “What do you want me to do for you?”

I'm so glad you asked Jesus! I've been waiting in the reception line of ecclesiastical bureaucracies my entire life to encounter you. Let's see Jesus. Well, you know my child that is graduating from college, I love them a lot, but can you make sure that they don't move back home? And Lord, you know that I've been buying that lottery ticket every week for the last few years, can you help me win for once? But seriously, if you could ask Jesus for anything *for yourself*, what would it be? "What do you want me to do for you?" Today is your opportunity for clarity because hearing the call of that personal question helps us to see Jesus for who he is and to see ourselves more clearly. As one commentator notes, this question, "underlines the importance of getting our deepest desires straight" (Lamar Williamson, Jr.). "What do you want me to do for you?" leads us to canvass the neighborhood of our hearts to search for what is most valuable and important to us and to name what we yearn for so deeply.

What are your deepest desires? "What do you want me to do for you?" You, *pas mois*. You. Is it to mend your broken family relationships? Provide meaningful life-giving work? Create new lifelong friendships? Heal your body physically? Give peace of mind? Erase all anxieties and fear about the future? Bestow courage to try something new? Be given the ability to forgive an enemy? Learn how to love again? "What do you want me to do for you?" I'm not the one asking this morning. Jesus is. "Take heart; get up, he is calling you."

Laura is one of my former seminary students who took heart. She used to come to class with a dog, a see-eye dog named Jira. I was used to having dogs as church members in Switzerland but I had never had a dog as a student. Laura was not born blind but due to a certain type of condition she gradually lost her eyesight. When she reached the point where she couldn't really see on her own, her family decided it was time to get a see-eye dog. When they arrived to pick up the new dog and the dog entered the room, Laura knelt down to meet the dog. When Jira came near her to greet her, it's almost as if Jira knew Laura's answer to "what do you want me to do for you?" Because when Jira came to her, this dog began to lick Laura's eyes as if to say I'm going to be your eyes from now on. Laura wanted to see and God provided an unexpected means for her to see. Laura might not have seen physically but she saw spiritually and felt the healing, graceful balm of the waters of baptism as Jira's saliva moistened her eyes as she licked them. What we expect is not always what we get. Laura is now a senior pastor at a United Methodist Church in South Carolina.

She has seen and heard the call of Jesus and has followed him on the way. Bartimaeus followed him too, though we hear nothing of his socioeconomic mobility or of a five year strategic plan from Jesus. Can you even imagine what Bartimaeus will see in the subsequent days ahead in Jerusalem? The unexpected awaits. Hearing the call does not mean that life will be like a bunch of sweet-smelling roses and an existential utopia. But it does mean that there is a Savior who cares so deeply for you and me that he's willing to take the time to call us and ask, "What do you want me to do for you?" I hope you'll honestly answer Jesus today.

And I hope by hearing you may see him and follow him on the way, maybe even joyfully dancing gangnam style to the Trinitarian, waltz-like rhythm of the gentle grace of God. That's what I imagine Bartimaeus did even as he sang, "I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind but now I see." Take heart... he's calling you.