“Who do you think you are?” - Stephanie Sorge, 2.25.24

“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask!” Can you believe the audacity? One of my dear friends is a Seminary professor, so she works with adults who are in the process of preparing for ministry, and doctoral students who have been at it for a while. One might think that such a student population would get the whole servant leadership thing, like the disciples should have. But some of the requests and demands she gets on a regular basis are a bit audacious, to say the least. I’m sure that some of you teachers and retired teachers can relate.

I wonder how Jesus felt. This demand immediately follows the third prediction of his passion in Mark’s gospel. The first time, Peter tried to chastise Jesus, and Jesus called him the Devil. The second time, the disciples didn’t understand, but were afraid to ask more clarifying questions. I can’t imagine why… This third time, it almost seems like they’re ignoring it. Jesus predicts it, James and John look at him, pause, and then say, “So, anyway, we need you to do something for us.” I imagine Jesus in the style of David Rose: “I have predicted my trial and death thrice. Thrice! And you want me to do whatever it is you ask?” Oh, the audacity!

This is the very definition of a teachable moment. When the other ten disciples get riled up, Jesus gives them all another lesson on servant leadership and what it means to be great. Jesus didn’t come to be served in this life or the next. He came to serve, and to give his life for the cause of liberation.

As if on cue, we meet Bartimaeus, a blind beggar. His position in life is constrained by his lack of sight. His life is on the margins, and when Jesus comes to town, he almost misses it. Who would have bothered to tell him? Jesus is on his way out of town when Bartimaeus learns that he is there, and he begins to shout. People tell him to be quiet, but he shouts even louder. His cry is for liberation, and Jesus responds. Jesus invites him forward, and poses the exact same question to Bartimaeus as he did to James and John: “What do you want me to do for you?” Bartimaeus dared to call out to Jesus, who had far more important things to do and people to see. And then, when prompted, he dared to ask for a miracle. Oh, the audacity!

Audacious: contemptuous of law, religion, or decorum. Recklessly bold. Intrepidly daring.[[1]](#footnote-1) That’s Merriam-Webster. Oxford gives a few possibilities, too: showing an impudent lack of respect, or a willingness to take surprisingly bold risks. But who decides what is lawless disrespect versus bold, daring action?

James and John were bold to ask for seats of privilege. Bartimaeus defied the rules and broke decorum in calling out to Jesus. Jesus didn’t judge between the two. He just asked, “What do you want me to do for you?”

The rich man from last week’s reading prided himself on being a rule follower. We tend to respect and value law-abiding citizens. That’s easy to do when the laws are favorable, or at least indifferent, to you.

Sixty years ago tomorrow, HR 7152 arrived from the House of Representatives to the US Senate. On March 9th, Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield moved to take up the measure, and a filibuster was launched to kill it. The longest continuous debate in Senate history finally ended in June, and the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed and signed into law in early July.[[2]](#footnote-2)

It was an audacious new law, daring in the scope of changes it would usher in across the country. It would not have come to be if not for the audacity - the disrespect for law, religion, and decorum - that forced the moment. Who did those second-class Americans think they were to demand equal rights and protections under the law? Who did allies think they were to support and participate in civil unrest and disobedience? Civil Rights activists defied laws, church leaders and pronouncements, and the rules of polite society to demand justice and liberation. Oh, the audacity!

Liberation demands audacity, because it is usually the law, religion, and decorum that create and maintain unjust and oppressive systems. In the face of the audacious brothers, the other disciples got angry. In the well-defined social norms of Jericho, Bartimaeus’s audacity drew scolding from his community. In both cases, others ask, “Who do you think you are?” And in both cases, Jesus’s only question is: “What do you want me to do for you?”

Bartimaeus asks for a miracle, and receives it. James and John ask for something that they don’t understand, and something which Jesus can’t grant, at least not in the way they want. Jesus asks what they want, but is also clear about his purpose: to serve and give his life to liberate many.

The service and work of liberation continues, and as members of the body of Christ, it is our work today. I hope Greg will forgive my paraphrase, but when he met with Session last week, he said he wanted to be part of a community that did more than simply gather to study, sing, and pray together each week. He articulated our call to act.

If Jesus were standing here today, and he asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” how would you respond? Do you want healing? Wholeness? Community? Do you want freedom from dependence on fossil fuels? Abolition of the prison industrial complex? Peace in the Middle East and Ukraine? Be bold! Be audacious!

If Jesus were standing here today… Hear these words attributed to St. Teresa of Avila: “Christ has no body but yours, No hands, no feet on earth but yours, Yours are the eyes with which He looks Compassion on this world… Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”[[3]](#footnote-3) So what do we want God to do in our midst, in and through this body of Christ?

I’m grateful for this community, and that we gather to study, pray, sing, and work together. I’m also grateful for the audacity that compels us to ask boldly for what it is we and others want and need, and then to work towards those ends. We are bold to ask because we claim our identity as beloved children of God, and together we seek to discern and pursue God’s will above our own. Let us be bold and audacious together, in love and service, striving for the liberation of many, because of God’s great love for all. Amen!

1. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/audacious [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/CivilRightsAct1964.htm#:~:text=The%20longest%20continuous%20debate%20in,Johnson. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://catholic-link.org/quotes/st-teresa-of-avila-quote-christ-has-no-body-but-yours/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)