

“The Outrageous Costs of Discipleship”

October 11, 2009 19th Sunday after Pentecost/B

Hebrews 4: 12-16, Mark 10:17-31

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We have this morning another one of Mark’s troublesome stories. Before we hear anything that sounds like Good News, we are confronted by the warning, “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter into the kingdom of God.” Those who are rich, (and by global standards that would be all of us) worry instantly that Jesus is talking to us. Well. You would be correct. Jesus is talking to all his disciples, but especially to those of us who have been privileged to have the material things we need. Our challenge is to find the Good News in Jesus’ teaching. This man that approaches Jesus is faithful, he has kept the commandments, he has done what God expects of him and still he wonders what must he *do* to inherit eternal life? He approaches Jesus because despite his faithfulness, he senses there is something missing. He is shocked by Jesus’ response.

Jesus tells him to sell all that he has and give the money to the poor. Then come be one of my disciples. Evidently the man could not comply with Jesus’ instructions. He goes away grieving. It is tempting to think this is just another story where Jesus tells us to do something that sounds good, but is impossible to accomplish. It sounds good to love one’s enemies and to pray for those who persecute you, but how many of us are really able to do this? It sounds good to turn and offer the other cheek when engaged in a conflict with someone, but who has ever done such a thing? It seems reasonable to instruct his disciples to divest themselves of their possessions and wealth in order to truly follow him, but not many of us are willing or able to do this. Where then is God in this story and what is God trying to teach us?

There are many lines that leap out and grab your attention. Perhaps you will meditate on this passage yourself and decide what part of it speaks to you. The line that grabs my attention this morning is “for mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” The man is trying to find out what he can do to ensure his eternal life. He has lived devoutly, and still he wants to know if there is more he can do to ensure his heavenly reward. Jesus essentially says, “no, there is nothing you can *do* to ensure your place in heaven or to find favor with God.” The writer Paul S. Nancarrow says, “The observation that he still lacks ‘one thing’ is not meant to indicate that there is one more task he can perform to earn salvation, that giving away all his wealth to serve the poor is the one final act that will seal his everlasting deal. Instead, the call to divest himself of his wealth through giving to the poor is a call to give up the entire enterprise of attempting to *do* something to inherit eternal life.” Wealth is an effective sign of power. Being wealthy allows you to make different choices. Wealth provides a sense of comfort and a means to influence others. The great danger of wealth, as Jesus explains it, is not that it is inherently evil, but that wealth makes it difficult to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Nancarrow says, “wealth is a constant temptation to put the working of one’s own will in place of responsiveness to God’s will; wealth almost inevitably constitutes a barrier to entering into right relationships of mutual well being;” he says, “wealth impedes the divine commonwealth of living and receiving in freedom and in love.”

Jesus invites us to do something that is almost as impossible as relinquishing our wealth. He invites us also to give up our own power. Remember, the last shall be first and the first shall be last. He tells this young man that you can not secure your place in heaven by the things you do or the riches you accumulate. You can not secure your place in heaven by giving all that up. The accumulation of stuff or power becomes a problem when it keeps us from following in Christ’s way. It becomes a problem when we would rather walk away than consider how to live with less. It becomes a problem when our possessions or ambitions or our need to succeed in the eyes of our neighbors keeps us from making the kind of decisions that build community and enrich our discipleship. This is a constant struggle for disciples. We struggle to do what is right by the world’s standards and what is faithful by God’s standards.

It is not astonishing that the young man walks away sad. What may be surprising to us is the way Jesus responds to this man even as he delivers this difficult invitation to radical discipleship. The story says “Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘you lack one thing; go sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’” Even when Jesus challenges us, he always loves us in a way no other person can. He knows how difficult it will be for this man to follow him. He does not judge him, but loves him in this moment. He knows that because he loves him, his heart may later be transformed, and indeed he may find a way to follow. It may be difficult or perhaps impossible to do what Jesus asks of us, but the source of that difficulty comes not from Jesus, but from us.

Many times we respond as the rich young man does. Without hesitation we assume this thing Jesus asks is simply too difficult. It is easier to say no and walk away, than to submit to God’s will and experience the joy and peace in that surrender. That is what Jesus asked this young man to do. He invited him to surrender his will to God’s will. He assured him that he did not have the power to do things alone, however, in partnership with God, all things were possible. Perhaps this is where we find God in the story. One writer suggests that the rich man has been thinking of God as one who is distant, one who is the ultimate scorekeeper, keeping track of what we do and deciding who has *earned* their reward in heaven. Jesus helps him to see God differently. He offers a more intimate image of God as one who is present in his life, empowering him to live moment to moment realizing that all things are possible in partnership with this loving and compassionate God.

There are always costs and joys of discipleship. Perhaps you are able to see yourself in this rich young man. He is what we might call today a seeker. Despite his faithfulness, he senses there is something more powerful and profound that he has yet to experience. I imagine he is not sure exactly what he is seeking and therefore could not have fully anticipated what it is Jesus will offer. The author Paul Wadell says “sometimes we are

most afraid of what we most need. It's one of the more perplexing mysteries of the human heart. Happiness, peace, healing and all the other elements of fullness of life can be right in front of us, but instead of embracing them we back away in fear. We know what we need to do to have more blessed and satisfying lives, but in the face of something immensely promising, we are too often like the young man in our Gospel story from Mark; we walk away sad. As a result we exclude ourselves from the life we not only could have, but that God surely wants for us.”¹

Jesus helps us to understand that we will find what we seek by surrendering to a deeper relationship with Jesus. When we realize that all things are possible with God, then all things change. When we misunderstand what God is saying or we give up too soon, God grieves with us. However, God does not give up on us. God keeps inviting us to face what is difficult and to surrender in ways that seem frightening and impossible. It is difficult to live from this place of profound trust. Many of you may have had such an experience in your life, a time when you were being asked to make a bigger sacrifice than you thought you were able to make. Many of us face such decisions every day. In these uncertain times, we wonder if we will have what we need to provide for our family or do we already have more than we need. It takes courage to ask God to reveal the answers to such questions. How can I live a more faithful life? How do I let go of my fear, live from a place of vulnerability, in order to live more closely to the way Jesus intends for disciples to live? It is amazing the freedom and joy you experience as you give up more of your stuff or yourself, those things you once thought were so important.

Imagine Jesus loving you into a new way of being, taking your fear, doubt and uncertainty and transforming it into joy. Jesus says, Trust me, would I ever steer you wrong? Yes, it is “easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God...for mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” We do not know what becomes of this young man. Perhaps at that moment he did not possess the courage or the will to do as Jesus asks. However, for God all things are possible. Jesus was ready if the young man returned, ready to surrender and begin a new life in Christ. Jesus will be there whenever we are ready to surrender, loving us into a new way of being. May it be so! Amen

¹Paul J. Wadell, “Living by the Word,” Christian Century, October 6, 2009, p. 18.