

Season after Pentecost [Proper 23B]

October 10, 2021

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Psalm 90; Mark 10: 17-31

“Grace to you and peace from God –Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen”

“If you found yourself apprehensive listening to the gospel lesson... if you felt troubled by Jesus stark command to the man to sell it all...if you’re not sure you want to know what this might have to do with you.... if you wait warily to hear what on earth I will have to say about it all, then you have heard God’s Word and heard rightly. Fannie Crosby might have us sing, “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!,” but Mark’s accompaniment to his gospel would more likely be “Blessed disturbance, Jesus is mine!”¹ This story intends to disturb because Jesus tells the truth and desperately wishes that we settle for no less than abundant life with God.

A man runs up to Jesus. Unlike Matthew who described him as “young” or Luke who says he’s a “ruler,” Mark simply calls him a “man” — a human being. Someone like you or me. He doesn’t walk but runs up to Jesus. There is urgency in his movement. Foregoing dignity to show respect, the man drops to his knees before Jesus, erupting with his burning question, *“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”*

Jesus slows things down a bit by first commenting on being called “Good Teacher” — God is the only one to decide what is “good.” The man, eager and earnest, doesn’t argue the point with Jesus. He wants to hear what Jesus has to say. Jesus reviews the commandments about how humans are to treat one another. The man joyfully reports that he has lived faithfully, following God’s commands. I don’t think he’s bragging. He’s giving his witness. He’s expressing the joy he’s known living in God’s will. Still, there he is asking if there’s something more he’s to do to please God, an additional something he could do to make absolutely sure he has God’s acceptance.

Jesus looks at this zealous, sincere man and loved him. Loved him! Don’t miss that important part of the action — Jesus looked at the man and loved him. And then, with

nothing but love for the man, Jesus 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.” Jesus hits the mark. “You want the treasures of heaven? Then you have to let go of what you’ve put your trust in and trust in me.”

Is it only me, or do you almost hear Jesus holding his breath, silently praying, “Father, help him. Father help him. Father help him,” as he waits for the man’s response? And don’t you find yourself wishing that maybe *this* time, when you hear this story read, the man would say, “Oh yes!” with great enthusiasm and rise with the surprising joy of a prisoner set free to become the thirteenth apostle?

But he doesn’t. Shocked and grieving, the man walks away, “for,” Mark reports, “he had many possessions.” If he did not know before, the man now knew there was another competitor for his allegiance. “The only person in Mark’s Gospel whom Jesus is said to love.... is also the only person in this Gospel who turns down Jesus’ invitation to follow.”² Jesus’ disciples were equally astounded. They had been raised to think that wealth was a sign of God’s approval and favor. So if this guy doesn’t have a reserved seat on the glory train, “then who can be saved?” Oh, that the man had stayed around to hear Jesus say, “For [all] mortals it *is* impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” (Mk 10: 27b)

“The story, then, is about someone like us being met by Jesus and asked to follow, but who decides that it is not a way he wants to go. He walks away. A *person like us* is being invited to be a disciple of Jesus, and *this person, who is like us*, walks in the other direction. And the reason ---- “we relatively well-fixed North Americans” are loathed to note — is money³,” possessions and all the comfort, status and privilege they endow.

“Today’s gospel reminds us that there are good, understandable, practical reasons for not following Jesus. Jesus is too often presented by churches, from the best of motives, as the solution to all our problems, the way to fix everything that’s wrong in our lives. But

this story reminds us that Jesus is sometimes the beginning of problems we would never have had if we had not been met by Jesus!”⁴

When we meet Jesus, he comes into our best of intentions, into our lifestyles, into our opinions of ourselves and others, into our politics, economy, schools, workplace and culture and he calls us to follow him. Jesus will challenge us in those very areas of our lives that are getting in the way of a total commitment to him. Money can be a big encumbrance. There’s no way to tame Jesus’s warnings about it. But he’s also has told us about some other detractors, like cares of the world, wanting to be the greatest or first, ignoring those who are suffering or hungry, caring more about our reputation than what is right. When this invading Jesus who loves us, asks us, day in and day out, to follow him away from such things, what will we do? Walk away? Pretend to follow but remained unchanged? Or risk surrendering to Jesus whatever habits, grudges, or idols get in the way? It’s a struggle and for that reason we often begin worship confessing that we are like camels who can’t fit through the eye of a needle. God looks on us with love and we receive forgiveness. And in that forgiveness, Jesus promises that through God it **is** possible for us to be transformed and grow, to let go of what ever gets in the way of claiming the power and purpose of our discipleship to bear God’s healing and love into this world.

Did the man in today’s gospel look over his shoulder as the disciples walked away with Jesus? Did he wish he would dare to take the risk of giving up all he had and trusting God?⁵ We do not know. We **do** know something that man may not yet have realized. He had been kneeling in front of Emmanuel — God-with-us. He “who was possessed by his possessions was standing before the Almighty Provider.”⁶ He who felt discouragement and grief, had met grace incarnate. His vulnerability may have been the very way he could have become available for ministry. In other words, he turned away too soon. What might have happened if he stayed with the Lord who loved him — flaws, fears, doubts and all? What might have happened if he offered his shock and grief to Jesus, who loved him? We can’t know the answer for that man long ago. But what about us?

We are meeting Jesus today in this gospel. Jesus will meet us in the bread and wine. “What must I do to inherit eternal life,” we ask Jesus. In the word, baptism and Eucharist, Jesus says, “Your eternal life, I have that covered. It is your inheritance. Now, follow me.” Jesus is challenging you, me today to let go of that thing — that habit, value, possession, opinion — that is getting in the way of following him more nearly, day by day? It’s not giving up something for the sake of giving up something but to follow Jesus. Only you know what that is at this juncture of your life and how you struggle to loosen its hold on you. But I can tell you this — we do not have to walk away discouraged, like the man who had many possessions. We need to walk away **with** Christ, to let Jesus strengthen and love us into freedom from our enslaving idols. Because “for mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” Let our daily prayer be, as one song put it, “O dear Lord, *three things I pray: to see you more clearly love you more dearly, follow you more nearly, day by day.*” Amen

Linda M Alessandri 10/8/21

ENDNOTES

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1. Play on lyrics from Patrick J. Willson in his sermon “Blessed Disturbance” as posted on www.GoodPreacher.com
 2. Barbara Brown Taylor, “Rich in Love,” Always a Guest (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Know Press, 2020) p. 94
 3. Quote and paraphrase of material by The Rev. Dr. William H. Willimon “The Peril (and the Promise) of Being Met by Jesus” Mark 10:17-31 Proper 23 - Year B October 11, 2009 as posted on day1.org
 4. Willimon “The Peril (and the Promise) of Being Met by Jesus”
 5. The Rev. Dr. Wiley Stephens “Sticker Shock for the Soul” Mark 10:17-27 20th Sunday after Pentecost October 14, 2012 as posted on www.day1.org
 6. Previous two sentences paraphrased from “It’s Not Always What You Think” by Rev. Ozzie E. Smith, Jr, October 12, 2003 as posted on www.day1.org