

Used

A sermon preached by Rev. Ginger E. Gaines-Cirelli for “A Sermon for Every Sunday,” October 10, 2021, The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Mark 10:17-31

Have you ever felt used? It is a crummy feeling to be treated as a pawn or stepping stone in someone’s plan, as an unwilling object used for another’s benefit or pleasure. It is dehumanizing and painful. No one wants to be used in that way. But there is another way to think about being used. God wants to use us, not in a dehumanizing way, but in a way that makes us partners (some call it being co-creators) with God in the work of love, mercy, justice, and peace that is the Kingdom. God wants to use us in a way that helps us become *more* human, more ourselves, more whole. And, God knows, that humanizing effect happens as we love, as we serve, as we share ourselves and what we have.

Over the years, I have heard so many folks—of every age and stage of life—talk about how they want to find meaning and purpose in their lives. “Why am I here?”—that’s the big question. And our faith can be a primary resource in discerning an answer. I think many, if not most, of us would like to believe that if God communicated to us clearly and directly an answer and direction, we would go!—or if God let us know how our lives could be used for the greater good, we’d do it, even if it was difficult.

And this week, we encounter a wealthy man who gets what is so rare for most of us: a clear and unambiguous message and direction. The man asks, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus—out of love (vs.21)—tells him. And then the man turns away...not full of joy and purpose...but with grief.

Why? Perhaps because Jesus' response wasn't what he wanted to hear. Or maybe because he didn't believe it was possible to do what Jesus suggested. I think it is important to note this is the only story Mark tells of someone who is called to follow Jesus and refuses.

The story provides clues about what's going on here. We know the man who approaches Jesus has "many possessions." He is rich. And the question he asks of Jesus provides the first clue: "What must I do to inherit...?" The question has the sense of acquiring something, of earning something, perhaps even of buying something. The man is functioning within a market economy mindset: "What will it take to get this other thing that I want?" Jesus' response is to recite the last six commandments of the Big Ten. He doesn't name the first four—which have to do with our relationship with God—but rather, focuses on the last six, which are all about our relationship to our neighbor. And Jesus edits one of the commandments—evidently just for the benefit of this man before him. In verse 19 of our passage, instead of "you shall not covet" Jesus says, "you shall not *defraud*." Obviously, this rich man probably doesn't covet much—he doesn't really need to! The thing that made folks wealthy in Jesus' day was to own property, so we can assume that this rich man had lots of property. Folks gained more wealth by acquiring the land of debt-defaulting neighbors (foreclosures?); therefore, it is also reasonable to assume that those who had lots of property, lots of wealth, had gained that wealth at the expense of the poor. In fact, the Greek word for "defraud" literally means "to keep *away* from someone, to deprive, to take away what rightfully belongs to someone else." "You shall not defraud" takes on a richer tone in this light, doesn't it? It means that in order to follow the commandment would mean that the man has to give back what doesn't really belong to him—that he would have to

take seriously the call to do something about the way that the goods of the earth are unequally distributed.

But the man insists that he has followed all these commandments “since his youth.” So Jesus just asks him to put his money where his mouth is. And here’s where the story really kicks in to high gear. Jesus says, “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.” There it is. And at this, the man is “shocked” and goes away sad because he had many possessions.

This man was right there in the presence of Jesus who was calling him, reaching for him, wanting to embrace him on the journey toward becoming more human. Jesus was inviting him into a life of sharing and generosity and self-giving—a life of caring for the poor and suffering—a life that connects us like living stones into the household of God. All he had to do was to let go of his possessions—to return to the poor what didn’t really belong to him anyway—and to follow...and the man turned away—grieving!

What a missed opportunity. The man’s life and wealth could have been used to transform the world. He could have become a great benefactor in the Kin-dom, a restorer of justice, a contributor to God’s vision of mercy, generosity, and care for the poor. He had an opportunity to share in God’s way of giving life so that others receive life—and his own life could have been transformed in the process. But his possessions were his obstacle, his stumbling block. He just couldn’t let go.

Jesus goes on to teach the disciples about how hard it is for those with wealth to enter the Kingdom of God. And this teaching is not that wealthy people *can't* enter—after all there are plenty of accounts of Jesus welcoming wealthy folks into his fellowship and into the Kingdom. No, the teaching isn't that wealthy folks can't enter the Kingdom but just that it is very difficult...

because of the seductive power of wealth, because the more we have the more we have to focus on taking care of what we have, because of the false sense of security that wealth provides, because the more money we have the more selfish we tend to become—it seems that for many rich people, the focus becomes serving the self and *not* serving the poor and the suffering.

Of course, we all find ourselves at very different places along the wealth spectrum. In fact some of you may be thinking, “I don't have lots of possessions or money—I'm barely making ends meet. What can this story possibly have to say to me?” The answer, I think, is that the point of the story is not so much about *how much* you have, but about your relationship to *whatever* you have. The question posed to the man in today's Gospel is a great litmus test. If Jesus asked you to part with some cherished possession so that it might be used for the sake of the poor, what would your response be? It is fairly common, I fear, to minimize the implications of the basic Christian proposition that all we have is a gift from God and that we are simply given responsibility to use God's possessions wisely and lovingly. “Yeah, yeah,” we say, “all I have is a gift from God. But it's still *mine*.” And so we cling to our possessions—and somewhere someone goes hungry and without shelter and without care and without what they need to be whole... Out of fear or control or selfishness we turn away from the one who can put our lives and our wealth to very good use. We turn away from the opportunity to be transformed through allowing all that we have and all that we are to become part of God's project of love, healing,

peace, and compassion. That’s what the man did in the gospel story. Could he have made a different choice? Of course he could. And so can we.

Richard Rohr tells the story of a couple he knows who are quite wealthy but who choose to live simply without excess luxuries or status symbols. They very intentionally use their money to support charities and the church. The mother gathers their six (!) children together each month as she writes checks, telling the kids a story about each charity to which the money is being sent—and helping them understand why other people need the money more than they do. Rohr says “I think the mother’s check-writing process is probably the best form of religious education. The rubber has met the road. It’s not highly metaphysical and spiritual; it’s ‘Jesus means this. Commitment means this. Love means this.’”ⁱ

I love the line from the Broadway show *Hello, Dolly!*, “Money is like manure; it’s not worth a thing unless it’s spread around encouraging things to grow.”ⁱⁱ Today, Jesus invites you and me to be used for the Kin-dom, to allow our lives and whatever wealth we have to be spread around encouraging things to grow. Jesus says, “Come and follow me.” What do you say?

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ⁱ Richard Rohr, *Radical Grace: Daily Meditations*, John Feister, Editor, Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 1995, p. 301.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 66.