

“Letting Go”

Mark 10:17-31

Proper 23B

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Jesus’s directive for the rich man to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor makes today’s gospel lesson one of the most controversial and perhaps most creatively interpreted passages in Christian history. Monastics point to this passage as the basis for their vow of poverty. Others insist Jesus’ directive was only meant to apply to the rich man himself, or only to the very rich, which often is defined as anyone with more resources than we have. Still others argue that Jesus’ main concern here is “attachment” to wealth, not the possession of it. Or that the story is meant to underline that salvation comes not from human piety but from God’s grace alone. Each of these interpretations has merit, and yet none do full justice to the story.

The passage is challenging, haunting, and distinctive and a version of it is found in all three synoptic gospels. The man eagerly runs toward Jesus, humbly kneels before him like someone seeking healing and earnestly asks, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” The man’s approach to Jesus is indicative of someone who is profoundly struggling. He is asking about how to have a life that is fulfilling and deep and satisfying in this lifetime and in a way that has significance for the future? And he wants to know what he can DO in order to get that kind of life. What a great question!

Jesus’ first response is, “You know the commandments...” and lists off commandments about one’s relationship to others—do not murder, commit adultery, bear false witness, defraud...”I’ve done all of these since I was a kid,” the man says. Then, Jesus looks upon him with love and 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.”

Have a yard sale, give the money to your neighbors on the other side of tracks, then, come and follow me—that’s how you’ll find the kind of life you are looking for.

The first move in finding the kind of life the man seeks is letting go of some things. You lack one thing, so go, sell, give, come, follow Jesus directs. Does the man’s wealth cause him to trust more in his own resources and self-sufficiency than in God? Or does Jesus tell him to sell the stuff and give the money to the poor because his life is devoid of generosity and the joyful sharing of blessings with others? Both of these hazards of wealth—the fallacy of self-sufficiency and the negation of generosity—can cut people off from living a fully human life with God and neighbor. Whatever the reason, Jesus lovingly tells him to let the stuff go. Let the stuff in his way go so that he can follow Jesus. So he can receive the kingdom of God

now. To let go so he can take up something greater. So that his attention might shift from the tight grip on his own resources toward what is possible with God. So that God might do the impossible with him, too—the work of transformation.

This is the only episode in the gospels in which Jesus calls someone to follow him and gets turned down. But maybe the man turns Jesus down for some good reasons of his own. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says, “the man resisted the transformation, too invested in the way he had his life arranged.”

Because letting go is hard. Letting go of our stuff, or our guilt, or our shame, or our resentments, or our pain is hard. To let go of what we already know and their established patterns, even if unhealthy, is no small thing.

Have you ever watched a trapeze artist? The first rule of the trapeze artist, the one that must always be obeyed, is that you cannot hold onto two trapeze bars at the same time. In order to move from the bar that you’re on to the bar that swings in front of you, you must first let go of what you are holding on to. You cannot move from where you are to where you’re going without releasing your grasp. And that means tolerating a few moments with no visible means of support. Like the trapeze artist who must let go of one bar in order to grab on to the next bar, letting go of whatever we are holding on to requires a faith, a trust, a willingness to release. As Danaan Parry describes life as a trapeze artist, “It is my next step, my growth, my aliveness coming to get me. In my heart of hearts I know that for me to grow, I must release my grip on the present well-known bar to move to the new one.”

A few years ago I got a call from a friend and colleague in ministry, whom I hadn’t talked with or seen in a good long while. He sounded really good as we talked about how our lives and ministries were going. I asked him how he and his family were doing, and he said, “Well, I’ve been sober for 14 months now.” I had no idea my friend was battling addiction, but was grateful for what he shared with me, for his sobriety, and the new life he seemed to have found. Later that day I was leaving the church just around the time the Alcoholics Anonymous group was setting up the coffee for their Tuesday night meeting down the hall in the library classroom. I stopped in the hallway to check in with the faithful fella who always gets there early to start the coffee. I told him how glad I was that they were at our church week after week. And mentioned my friend’s journey and the new life he has found in sobriety and the support of AA. The faithful fella who makes the coffee looked at me and said with the deepest sincerity, “You know, for many of us, this is the best life we’ve ever known.”

What must I do to have eternal life, live the best life, the life of the ages, the kingdom now? Let go of some things. Release your grip on them so they can release their grip on you. Take the first step and let go of some stuff so you can grab hold of something else—something better and greater and deeper, that offers full and whole-hearted living in this world. Taking the first step toward letting go of what we know and even treasure—that's what Jesus invites the man with much wealth to—and it is hard. So much so that he ends up walking away, grieved by it all.

This passage is one that doesn't not allow us to turn our gaze from the hard edge of the gospel or the economic consequences of discipleship that demand to be taken seriously. The truth is there are a lot of really good and understandable reasons for not following Jesus. We ought not pretend otherwise.

Remember that the rich man comes with urgency towards Jesus and kneels before him as one in need of healing. I'd argue that even if our bank accounts don't match up with the rich man's, his malady is one for which we might all be in need of healing. Healing that begins with taking the first step of letting go of some things. Taking the first step in something that feels impossible. Attending the first AA meeting, or calling the marriage counselor or the therapist, coming out of the closet, or joining a community of faith, telling someone a hard truth, stepping off the wheel of the rat race, letting go of the way you thought your life would be, or even acknowledging a call to ministry—these are the steps that lead us to aliveness. To our most authentic lives. Parting with much of what we know and are familiar with in order to follow this life-giving, world-transforming, radically-loving Jesus. Letting go in order to take up. In following this Jesus there is both peril and promise.

But, letting go of some things may just be exactly what we need in order to grab hold of the very best life we have ever known. A life that puts us in right relationship with God and neighbor, which is, of course, the kind of healing we all most need and quite possibly best life we could ever know—one that dispels us of our notions of self-sufficiency and leads us to greater generosity and a deeper reliance upon God's grace and goodness.

Fellow Sermon for Every Sunday preacher and former Chaplain at Duke University, Will Willimon, tells the story of exploring this story with some university students and being surprised by their responses:

"Had Jesus ever met this man before?" asked one of students.

"Why do you ask?" Willimon asked.

"Because Jesus seems to have lots of faith in him. He demands something risky, radical of him. I wonder if Jesus knew this man had a gift for risky, radical response. In my

experience, a professor only demands the best from students that the professor thinks are the smartest, best students. I wonder what there was about this man that made Jesus have so much faith he could really be a disciple."

Another student said thoughtfully, "I wish Jesus would ask something like this of me. My parents totally control my life just because they are paying all my bills. And I complain about them calling the shots, but I am so tied to all this stuff I don't think I could ever break free. But maybe Jesus thinks otherwise."

Peril and promise.

Death and resurrection.

All things new.

Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

Amen.