

“First and Last”

Valley Presbyterian Church – March 1, 2020

First Sunday of Lent

Psalm 62

Rev. John Wahl

Mark 10:17-31

Once again, we encounter Jesus when he is “on the way.” In Mark’s gospel, this is not just any journey, but represents the road he is taking to Jerusalem and the cross. So, while the demand Jesus makes on this man may seem extreme to us – to give away all of his possessions to the poor and follow – it is certainly no less than the demand he places upon himself, giving up not just his wealth, but his very life for the world, including this man.

About this man; Matthew’s gospel calls him young, and Luke says that he was a ruler, but at this point, we are only told that someone runs up to Jesus and kneels before him. We do not know anything else about him. Because he kneels, we can assume that his admiration for Jesus is genuine and his address to Jesus as “good teacher” is sincere. Typically, when people kneel before Jesus it is because they – or someone they love – have some dreaded disease or are possessed by a demon. And almost every time that Jesus orders them to go, like he does with this man, it’s in relation to healing. So what if this particular rich, young ruler isn’t just pious – obeying all the commandments – but heart-sick: knowing somewhere deep down that, despite outward appearances, he’s still missing something, something important, something that’s a matter of life and death.

This man had great possessions, but so do we: at least when we are compared to the majority of the world’s inhabitants. Most of us have more stuff than we need. Maybe Jesus sees that all this particular man has – knowledge of the law, perfect piety, and abundant wealth – has distorted his sense of himself, and of God, and of his neighbor. Maybe Jesus tells him to get rid of his stuff so that he can instead live by faith in God and in solidarity with his neighbor for the first time in his life; which would be something like – when you think about it – having treasure in heaven.¹

Jesus looks upon this man with love. He does not treat him as insincere or mock him for being self-righteous; he does not scold or judge, rather Jesus loves him. Still, the man decides to walk away. This is the only story in the gospels where someone refuses the call to follow Jesus.

And the rich, young ruler is not the only one who is shocked by Jesus’ pronouncement; so are all those within earshot. Given that wealth was considered a

¹ David Lose, “Curing Our Heartsickness”

sign of blessing in the first century (as, we could argue, it still is in the twenty-first), Jesus' words to this man and the follow-up statement about the difficulty the rich will have in entering the kingdom are alarming.

All of the other disciples had to do the same thing in order to follow Jesus. They dropped their nets, got up from their desks, left their families, and followed Jesus. In this case, the man decided he could not do it; he had a lot of wealth, and he was not able to let go of it. He went away from the encounter disappointed because the cost of discipleship was too great.

Why is it difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of God? Is it the temptation to believe that wealth makes God unnecessary? Is it becoming insulated and desensitized to the needs of others by wealth? Can it be that wealth in some way distances us from the inescapable human dimension of being dependent on others? After all, from the beginning of creation, God said that is "not good" for us to be alone.

It could be that our fear is not so much about not having particular possessions, but that we are afraid that lacking them, we aren't sure who – if anyone – will be there to help us when we need it most. We cannot be inter-dependent – full members of a community – if we continue to cling to the things we believe will make us independent; self-sufficient.²

Who, then, can be saved? If not a rich, pious man, then who? If not a disciple, who gave up everything to follow Jesus, then who? Ultimately, we all have the same problem with earning our way into salvation. It can't be done. Gazing at his disciples, just as he gazed at the rich man and loving them just as much, Jesus says, "for humans it is impossible, but not with God; for God all things are possible." This is not a cheap grace solution that simply allows us to carry on with business as usual. Something will have to change for the impossible to be possible.³

The Fourth of the Seven Marks of Vital Congregations is Empower Servant Leadership. In other words, it is the job and calling of the church to create opportunities and pave pathways for individuals to lead according to the example of Jesus and the disciples: those who willingly give up everything for the sake of the gospel. And while we tend to focus on what they lacked in possessions, we overlook what might be gained: relationships grown, faith deepened, gifts discovered, and healing in body, mind, and spirit.

In the Presbyterian Church, we use a representative governing structure: electing those that we believe to be called into designated leadership positions. We believe that our leadership should be representative of our membership in age, gender, and experience. They are ordained and installed into particular positions – either lay

² Robert Williamson and Amy Robertson, *Bibleworm Podcast*

³ Mark G. Hoffman from *WorkingPreacher.com*

or clergy – in order to provide spiritual as well as practical leadership; they are called to give up their personal interests for the good of the body of Christ and the sharing of the good news of the gospel; they are encouraged to think not about what they might gain, but what they might give away; the first will be last.

Here, we see Jesus reassuring his disciple – who have answered his call to become servant leaders – that their reward will be abundant, but that it will require them becoming vulnerable to persecution and personal loss. Becoming leaders in this movement requires a new understanding that the rewards of eternal life are shared within the community and are not just for individuals.

Let's look back again at the rich, young ruler's question that initiated this whole incident: "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" His question already hints at a deeper answer. What can anyone do in order to inherit anything? Inheritance is more about belonging to a family than it is about earning anything. And so, leaving everything to follow Jesus – as Peter says the disciples have done; and as all of us, to some extent, have ourselves done – brings them into a new family. The household of God is an incredibly abundant present reality, but one that is marked with all kinds of challenges and stumbling blocks. It can be beautiful, but also maddening. It can both reassure us and frustrate us. But what it is now is not all that it can and will be; it is also a future reality characterized by the fullness of life when things like first and last, rich and poor, strong and weak will no longer have any relevance.

The rich, young ruler asked about living as an inheritor of the life to come. He wasn't asking about how he could earn his way to heaven. He was a member of the family who wanted to know what kind of life to live; how to be healed of that thing in him which seemed to be sick. In the same way Jesus looked at him, Jesus also looks upon us with love and – perceiving that there is some kind of heart-sickness in us – is asking something of us: giving us something to do, something to give up or give away, somewhere to go. This is not about our salvation: that takes place through the grace of God and our faith in Christ. But that's not end; it's only the start. Just like with the rich, young ruler, God isn't only concerned about our eternal destiny but also cares about our life here and now, as members of God's family, with each other in God's creation.

Sometimes, when we are challenged to be vulnerable – to give up something that seems valuable or essential – we are tempted to walk away. But, Jesus continues to love us, and to call us, and to teach us that it is not good for us to be alone, but to share who we are and what we might have for the sake of one another, in the context of a community; and to trust that God – for whom all things are possible – will fill in the gaps. Amen.