

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
October 14, 2018
Mark 10:17-31

“First, Last and In Between”

Mark is not my favorite gospel, and when I hear passages like this one I know darn well why. Like the rich man in our story, I too would walk away sad if Jesus were to look in me in the eye and tell me to sell everything I have and give the proceeds to the poor. I’m not proud of that, but I don’t think I’m alone in feeling this way, either. I’m willing to sell some of my possessions and give the proceeds to the poor, but all of them? That I can’t do. I have a family to think about, after all. But truth be told, I don’t want to sell everything, either.

Let’s be honest, shall we? Mark’s gospel is relentless. All this talk about plucking out eyeballs, and cutting off hands – like we heard last week and I managed to avoid talking about, or divorce being the equivalent of adultery (which I did talk about), or denying ourselves and taking up our cross (which we heard a few weeks ago) isn’t the type of rhetoric that’s going to bring in the masses, is it now? Why, it’s almost as if Mark wants to make faith impossible. Doesn’t Mark know that people want ease? That making discipleship appealing to the masses is a far better church growth strategy than all this talk about the rich not being able to enter the kingdom of God? Is it any wonder that Joel Osteen and Joyce Meyer and all those other prosperity gospel preachers have bent over backwards to re-interpret what Jesus had to say about money (a subject he talked about more than any other, I’ll point out) to suit their wallets and match their paychecks? And look, it paid off! They’ve brought in the masses. Except for the mass of people displaced by Hurricane Harvey last year. Osteen didn’t open the doors to his 16,800 seat church to them (at least, not at first). Instead, he chose to tweet “God’s got this” and “don’t drift into doubt and fear ... stay anchored to hope.”

But in all fairness to the prosperity gospel preachers, many commentators have done hermeneutical gymnastics to make this passage more appealing. Some of their better stunts include telling us that:

- The rich young man didn't really keep the law, so that business about giving up his possessions was just a way of calling his bluff. *Or:*
- Nobody can keep the law, hence nobody can give up everything; so this story is just a rhetorical device to call our bluff, and once we grasp that, we're off the hook. *Or:*
- Giving up everything was a command to this particular rich man, but only to him. It makes no claim on anyone else, it's just another hyperbole to get us to give up some of our stuff. *Or:*
- It was a real command, but it only applies to the rich. Since all of us can think of someone richer, we don't qualify. Whew. Time to go shopping.

Now, it's easy for me to criticize and dismiss these theories, but what else can I do? As I wrote this sermon on my laptop computer in my lovely home in a "bougee neighborhood" (Tommy's words, not mine), a home that Henry jokingly refers to as an "upgrade" from our previous lovely home that was also in a nice neighborhood – though not the nicest in St. Louis, I'd point out, I'm looking for ways out of this story, too.

But unfortunately for me, and perhaps for you, there's no way out. It's an uncomfortable story. When we discover that discipleship has to do with our money, our shoulders sag, our faces drop, and we come up with every list of excuses as to why this story doesn't pertain to us and/or can't possibly be true.

"Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life," the man asks. Good question. Jesus tells him to keep the 10 commandments. Don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't bear false witness, honor your mother and father; and throws in an extra one: don't defraud. The man tells Jesus that he's kept all of the commandments since his youth. But he's desperate to know what *more* he can *do*.

To which Jesus, looking at him and loving him, replies, “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.”

But the man, instead of feeling relief that he now knew what he was lacking, instead felt shock and sorrow. And he went away grieving, because he had many possessions.

Now we always make the assumption that the man walked away sorrowful because he was unwilling to sell all that he had. But we don't know that for certain, do we? For all we know, the man walked away sorrowful precisely because he decided to sell it all. I don't know about you, but part of why this story makes me uncomfortable is because I would be sorrowful if I sold all of my stuff, too. My stuff brings me comfort and security; maybe your stuff brings you comfort and security, too. Or maybe you're afraid that if you didn't have your stuff, you wouldn't be secure. Isn't this why we all buy insurance? Like us, the man's action would have been fraught with emotion, because not only would he have been giving away everything he had worked so hard for, but he also would have been taking a decisive step into the future *not knowing what the future holds*.

But when do we ever know what the future holds?

You know, in our rush to assume the man wasn't willing to part with his possessions, we dismiss how hard it is to take those first steps . . .

But maybe we rush to judgement, because it's the demand to take those steps that really scares us.

I mean, just think about those scary first steps you've taken in life.

A year ago this time, I was living comfortably in St. Louis, Missouri. But I also had this nagging suspicion, what I think of as God, telling me it was time to go elsewhere. When I first decided to look for a new call, it was hard – there was a lot of comfort and security I had to part with to step into an unknown future. I'm glad I did, but those first steps were hard.

Any of us who have witnessed babies taking their first steps know they fumble and fall and are unsteady on their feet – first steps in life are like that.

They can be difficult, and sometimes painful. Attending the first AA meeting, calling the marriage counselor, talking with your child about what you found while cleaning their rooms that you didn't want to find; coming out; or leaving home . . . first steps are hard.

You know, people often say that when change occurs, especially change we didn't ask for, we need courage to get through the difficult times. But what we really need is courage to let go; to let go of our need for certitude (which sometimes we think our stuff brings, like the man did) and embrace uncertainty. For you see, renewal is only possible by going into and through transition, and transition always has at least as much to do with what we let go of, as it does with whatever we end up putting in its place.

The young man thinks he's built a solid foundation to secure his future. But Jesus tells him otherwise. "You lack one thing," he tells him. And what is that one thing? The belief that with God, anything is possible.

"With God, all things are possible," Jesus told the disciples after the young man left. And Jesus tells that to us, too—we who are hearing these words 2000 years later. "Nothing is impossible with God."

Sometimes we have a hard time believing that; maybe this is why the story makes us nervous . . .

As someone once said, ~~"For me, there is no figure in the entire Bible more tragic than this man. For me,~~ there is no story in the entire Bible more frightening than this one, because I don't want to be that man. I don't want to be the person who misses out on God's kingdom because I can't let go."

Do you want to be that man?

Jesus' requirements for discipleship are not easy . . . which could be why we always want to change the conversation. It requires a total transformation

and commitment on our part. It means removing the stumbling blocks that are in our way, no matter how heavy or cumbersome they may be, so we can step into the future God has planned. And yes, that's scary. Because we can't predict and can't manage the future. But God can.

Friends our lives are sacred journeys into which God speaks and comes. And sometimes, that journey takes us into uncertainty. And there, if we're willing to let go and let God, so to speak, we can with God's help discover the life God calls us to embrace. Because with God, "all things are possible." We are not left alone to take those first steps. God can and will help us with them.

And here's more good news. Jesus looked upon the rich man and loved him. The rich man is the only person, in all of Mark's gospel, who is singled out as loved by Jesus.

The only one.

And in that look of love Jesus had for the rich man, we are reminded that Jesus looks upon all of us, upon you, and loves you, too, and has great faith in you, because nothing is impossible for God.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Lord,

We offer our thoughts and prayers to you.

We put our trust in you to hear and respond to our needs.

We pray for your tender mercies for those of us who are suffering.

We pray for strength for those of us who are experiencing weakness.

We pray for comfort for those of us who are grieving.

We pray that though we encounter stumbling blocks when following you, that you would be with us and help us to overcome them.

Lord, we believe that your Kingdom is at hand;

And so we repent and believe with all our hearts your good news.

Lord remove from our lives those barriers that keep us from being in relationship with you, ourselves and others that we may truly live into the joy of your Kingdom.