

“What Stands in the Way?” CHC 10-11-15

Psalm 25:4-10; Mark 10:17-31

The first time I took seriously the call of Jesus to “come, follow me”, was the summer preceding my sophomore year in college. Though I was raised in the church and understood the ethical and moral boundaries that made for appropriate living as a Christian, I sensed that there was more to being a Christian. Internally I was feeling dissatisfaction and disappointment with the church. It wasn’t until the person and call of Christ to follow him became clear did I understand that Christianity was not just an ethical code of conduct but a relationship with a person who says, “Follow me”.

In asking the question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” I suspect that our wealthy friend, hearing Jesus, is not all that satisfied with his life. Perhaps he is looking for a prescription from Jesus, noted from his request, “What must I do...” Some years ago a confirmand came up to me after one of the sessions and asked, “What do I have to do to pass confirmation?” I admit, it would be easier if God kept a celestial ledger. Tell me, God, what I am supposed to do to pass heaven’s gate and I will do it. Webster defines a Christian as “a decent, civilized, or presentable person”. Just tell me how and what I have to do to be that Christian person.

Jesus doesn’t adhere to that tact. Our friend approaches Jesus with flattery by addressing him as “Good Teacher”. Jesus defers the address by asking a question. “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone”. Then Jesus refers him to the Ten Commandments which Jesus tells him, “You know”. At this point, he says, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth”. Notice now that the adjective, good, is removed. You can sense, however, that he is not satisfied with Jesus’ response. I believe that he is aware to the possibility that there is more beyond what he is experiencing in his life and faith up to this point.

What happens next? Mark tells us that, “Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and 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.’” The man is obviously taken back. So were the disciples and everybody else.

Why would this astonish the disciples and the rich man? Twice their amazement is stressed. Jesus is turning accepted Jewish popular standards and morality upside down. In fact, he still is. How so? The belief of that day assumed that a person’s prosperity is a sign of God’s favor and that of a good person. Therefore, if a man or woman is wealthy and prosperous, then God’s blessing and honor is operational. Wealth is the proof of good character and favor with God. Certainly this man is going to enter the kingdom.

What about us? I found interesting a study by Penny Edgell entitled “Faith and spirituality among emerging adults”. Some religious groups, she notes, emphasize strong boundaries and doctrinal rigor, but by and large, the overall tenor of America religiosity has been a kind of pragmatic moralism, or what sociologist Nancy Ammerman calls ‘Golden Rule Christianity’.

In a famous study of Muncie, Indiana, sociologist Theodore Caplow finds a pragmatic ‘common creed’ religiosity that emphasizes the importance of treating others well, of believing in heaven and that good

people go there when they die, of prayer and good works. Today's emerging adults, he found, share this pragmatic, non-doctrinal and moralistic approach to religion (Homiletics, Nov.-Dec., 2015, p.47).

However, there is one additional dimension. Emerging adults have a therapeutic orientation. It is a sense that religious involvement is a good thing to do if it makes one feel good about oneself or if it expresses something of one's individuality apart from a group-based identity, spiritually speaking. Sociologist Christian Smith calls this faith orientation of today's young adults as 'moralistic therapeutic deism'. The stinger is this. Smith says that they learned this from their parent's Baby Boom generation and our religious institutions.

I imagine Jesus looking at us with love in his eyes and saying to us, "You lack one thing". What would that be?

Jesus wants to free us. He doesn't want us to end up like Gulliver, waking up on the beach of the island of Lilliput, "huge among the pygmies", as one person put it, but "bound to earth by a multitude of little strings" (Interpreter's Bible, Matthew-Mark, vol.7,p.806).

C.S. Lewis uses the phrase "sweet poison of the false infinite" to describe the tendency of our human natures. We too easily substitute false infinities and earthly securities for the ultimate (Yancey, 'Grace Notes', p.199).

We cry for a world without confusion, a world full of order and purpose. ISIS has had success in offering the 'sweet poison of the false infinite' through slick web pages addressed to the Western World. The question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" is a subtext in all of our lives.

Jesus' offer to follow him comes within all contexts in life. As we reflect on the Democratic Republic of Congo this morning, Jesus' call comes amidst disorder and confusion. Political tension continues as religious leaders, activists, students and others have spoken out against proposed change to the Congo constitution and other proposals that would allow President Joseph Kabila to stay in power for longer than the two consecutive terms currently permitted.

Government authorities have sought to silence dissent with threats, violence, and arbitrary arrests. In East Congo, dozens of armed groups remain active, many of their commanders leading forces that have been responsible for numerous war crimes. Few have been held accountable. Congolese army soldiers have also been responsible for abuses against the civilian population they are supposed to protect.

This is the context out of which many of our brothers and sisters have lived and come from who are of our faith community. But it is a context in which Jesus, through his church, is still calling people to follow him and be faithful to that calling.

No matter where we are in life and where we live, it is easy to end up disappointed and left feeling empty. So Jesus comes to us saying, "One thing you lack". He presses us toward self-reflection and self-awareness. He invites us to go beyond a simple legal observance of the law or a moralistic therapeutic deism to define our goodness. We have all observed how religion and ethics may dwindle into ethical and moral concerns which often become mean spirited.

Jesus takes us beyond the moral conventions and beliefs of the day. He sees the rich man and you and me with a double eye, what we are and what we can be. In the film, 'The Longest Ride', we are brought into the lives of Ira and Ruth Levinson. Much in love, the inability to produce their own offspring causes stress in their relationship. Ruth is an elementary teacher. She asks the guardians of an impoverished and emotionally abused child if she can tutor him. Bringing him into her home she and Ira become attached to this bright child and ask if they can adopt him as their own. The boy's guardians say no and the day he leaves their home Ruth is devastated. Life is not the same after that. As the Levinsons say goodbye to the boy Ruth tells him that he can be anything he wants to be and to never sell himself short. Decades later, Ira, now 91, and Ruth deceased, learns that the boy grew up to be a college professor and that he believed he owed everything to Ruth.

Jesus goes way beyond saying that we can be anything that we want to be. We have an opportunity to hear God's voice when there is discontent within us, to get beyond the caution of negative avoidance, stuck on the do's and don'ts of conventional morality. Jesus invites us to embrace the fullness of the love of God where we can lose ourselves in a positive devotion of unmeasured giving. Jesus offers us "a way out of the concerns of an ethical bookkeeping into the deep joy of unmeasured love" (IB, vol.7, p. 804).

What did Peter gain as he left the fishing nets to follow Jesus? He started with a friendship with Jesus. That friendship led into a life of personal growth as Peter experienced the Spirit of God shaping his mind and heart, calling him deeper and deeper into the redemptive love of God. Life then became an adventure as he followed where Jesus led. And it is the same for us.

Jesus never calls us under false pretense. He never offers bargains, conceals the cross, or disguises the cost. The rich man didn't get as far as engaging the relationship. He just couldn't let go of the thing his heart was fixed upon.

I remember the interview that I had with Denver Presbytery when I was coming under care as a candidate. One pastor lectured me on the economic limitations of being a pastor, the long hours, and so on, as to discourage me. I recall being annoyed because I had already crossed that bridge when I embraced Christ's call to follow him. Sure, I didn't comprehend it all. How could I? I was still naïve, especially as I look back. But it wasn't about me anymore. It was about what God was calling me into. And it has been a relationship of love and grace. There has been a whole lot of personal growth, some of it not easy. Learning about myself, where I needed to grow and the kind of person Christ is calling me to be, and still is, is challenging. Through it all Christ's call is a wonderful life adventure full of surprises despite its disappointments, losses, and sufferings. But the subtext is a life full of grace, peace, and joy, Christ's grace, peace, and joy.

The rich man missed all of that. The disciples watched the shocked look on the man's face as he went away grieving. Stunned, they then heard Jesus say to them, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God!" Grounded in the conventional wisdom and morality of the day they are perplexed, asking, "Then who can be saved?"

“Nobody”, Jesus says. I like how Eugene Peterson translates the conversation in ‘The Message’; “Then who has any chance at all?” Jesus was blunt: “No chance at all if you think you can pull it off by yourself. Every chance in the world if you let God do it”. We don’t achieve a life in the Kingdom of God. We receive a life. The rich man is into achieving a life; “What must I do...?”

It is all about God’s grace working in each of our lives, bringing us to that place through whatever means, where we can meet Jesus. It is God’s way of keeping us in humble dependence. We don’t do anything. We simply let go of that which is standing in our way and then take Jesus’ hand.

What is it you lack this morning?

What do you need to do?

What do you need to sell or give?

How will you respond to Jesus’ invitation to “come, follow me”?