

“Leave Everything Behind”

Isaiah 55:1-2a,6-7

Mark 10:11-31

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“The love of God in Jesus Christ.” The love of God We are so used to that phrase, sometimes I wonder if we even *hear* it anymore. Surprisingly, the gospel uses the word “love” very sparingly. Did you know that love is mentioned only twice in the entire gospel of Mark? That’s right, love is mentioned just twice in the gospel. Once, when the scribe asks Jesus about the greatest commandment, and he answers, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself.” The only other mention is here, when Jesus looks at the rich man with love. Ironically, it is also the only time – the only time – anyone rejects Jesus’ invitation to follow.

Today I want to look at the factors that might cause us – unwittingly - to reject Christ’s ongoing call to us.

I want to start by acknowledging that the story of the rich man makes us cringe. Like the man in question, most of us are frankly appalled at Jesus’ commands: Go, sell, give, come, follow. The first thing we think is, “Jesus must be kidding. Surely he doesn’t mean we need to give everything away to follow him.” Is Jesus a Marxist? A redistributionist? Does he want us all to be monks or live in a commune? So disturbing is the thought of dispensing every thing we own that we quickly spiritualize the story.

And to some extent we’re right to spiritualize it. Jesus is bursting the popular balloon, ancient and modern, that wealthy people have been favored by God, but he is not proposing the opposite myth that poor people are

automatically more virtuous. The story of the rich man rejecting Christ is not just a diatribe against possessions. Instead, it's a story about how we each run the risk of clinging to something we think we need, anything we are dependent on for our identity or value, and by clinging to it, miss true freedom in Christ.

The truth is that money is hardly the only thing we are loath to give up. For some of us, image is of much higher value than wealth. Most of us women can relate to my friend who ran to the drug store one Sunday morning. She ran into an acquaintance who wondered why she wasn't at her usual church service – probably fearing she was ill and had come to find medicine. My friend had to admit that she had run out of mascara and couldn't bear showing up to worship “naked.” Any guy who has shown up without a jacket or tie to an event where it was needed can relate. Far sadder is the girl one of my out-of-state colleagues asked me to pray for. The girl has been hospitalized for bulimia. Her struggle with image is killing her. She is just twelve years old.

The problem of image takes any number of forms; not all of them are physical or related to beauty. For some image has much more to do with our accomplishments, our SAT scores (or our children's), the degrees we've attained or the title on our business card. For some it is the job we used to have, before we retired or the economy tanked, a former job that still feeds our sense of worth, and keeps us from imagining anything else for the future. The entrapment of image is not new. We all know the gospel story of Mary and Martha. When Jesus comes to dinner, Mary sits at his feet, enrapt by his teachings, while Martha scurries endlessly and misses everything – everything of life-giving value. How often have we been driven by our own to-do lists to

the point where it doesn't even dawn on us to sit and take in Jesus' words in Scripture or prayer?

Jesus invites you to follow him, and find abundant life. Do issues of image ever prevent you from taking him up on his offer?

Like the rich man who goes away sadly, we all run the risk of clinging to something we think we need, and miss true freedom in Christ. For some, its image; for others it might be addictions or dependencies that hold us back. Many among us have loved ones they ache over who are trapped in the cage of addiction; others have wrestled personally with this struggle. There are a thousand destructive habits that are desperately hard to give up once we start relying on them to take the edge off. For some, like my late mother, it was alcohol that soothed her fragile self-esteem and got her through the day. Others turn to drugs or gambling to feel like a million bucks, at least for a fleeting moment. For some of us our dependencies are socially applauded, like overwork that allows us to skip the tensions at home, or compulsive volunteering that makes us feel important and indispensable. Jesus invites us to pry our fingers off whatever is obsessively self-soothing, whatever is irrationally reassuring, and follow him ... follow him along a way not based on fear. Perhaps you can relate to that.

There are issues of image. There are problems with dependencies. And then there's money.

Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God." C.S. Lewis said it this way:

“All things are possible. It is even possible to get a large camel through the small eye of a needle. But it will be extremely hard on the camel.”ⁱ

One of my favorite teachers, Tom Long, told me once that he came to understand our gospel story anew after filling the pulpit at a tony suburb of New York, which he wryly called “a genuinely wealthy place – not ostentatiously, just participating in the ethos of furs.” The reception of his preaching there was different, Tom noted. With compassion not unlike Jesus’ he said, “People are not greedy, but they believe deeply in their hearts that they are deserving and good. [They are] Protestant doers-of-good, given the brains, power and wealth to do it.”ⁱⁱ They firmly believe that if they just know what they are supposed to *do*, they can get the job done the way Jesus wants it. Or, as another friend said, “In every age the wealthy have power; problems are simply things they should spend their power to fix.” The catch is this: there’s nothing we *can* do to earn or inherit or work or deserve our way to eternal life. It’s a gift. A gift we are to receive, Jesus says, like children.

Wealth brings many blessings with it. We’re able to live without worry, clothe ourselves and feed our families, enjoy experiences others never dream of and give generously to charities. But wealth also brings invisible shackles. “One of the curses of wealth, a friend once said, “is that it creates so many immediate ways to become insulated from community. If we don’t *need* ... our neighbors’ stuff, we perceive no *need* of them; we have all the stuff we need. If we have sufficient resources, we can keep all the trees trimmed, all the fences in good repair, and so the neighbors don’t even need to complain about our infringing on their lives – and we can set things up so they don’t seem to need us either.”

I want to be clear. Jesus isn't slamming wealth. There are wealthy people who are arrogant jerks, and there are poor people who are arrogant jerks; conversely, there are poor people who are saints, and there are rich people whose halos shine already. They have heard the call of Jesus and they've followed.

What does it look like? It is like this. Craig Dykstra, the head of the Lilly Endowment's religious philanthropy talks about the time when he was a young man teaching children how to swim. At first he'd just "throw" them in the water and try to tell them how to move, but they kept clenching up and sinking like a rock to the bottom. So he started approaching it a different way: he would hold them up and let them relax in his arms until bit by bit, sometimes over the course of days or weeks, he would take his hands out gradually from under them until they learned to trust the water – until they learned to trust the water would keep them afloat. That's what Jesus invites us to do: to learn to trust in the arms of God, to learn to trust that the love of God will keep us afloat, and trusting, learn to relax into that buoyant, joyful freedom instead of clenching up and grasping on things so tightly. That is true freedom; that is true life.

Lest I brag on some of you here, who are generous but private, I'll tell a story of someone in another place. A pastor in the deep South told me about a girl named Elizabeth who volunteered in India as a high school student. During her freshman year at Emory, she founded the Ashraya Initiative for Children to help street children in India. The project now houses nine children and offers outreach in health and education. This is remarkable enough. Then

one of her classmates, Robbie Brown, heard her speak about her work. Brown received the prestigious McMullen award for the top graduate who exhibits “outstanding citizenship, exceptional leadership, and potential for service to his or her community, the nation, and the world.” The prize included a cash award of \$20,000. Now, his family presumed their son might use the money towards Law School, but Robbie had a different plan. He gave his \$20,000, every cent of it, to his classmate, Elizabeth and to her project with poor kids in India. He said, “I was humbled to receive the McMullen, but ... I’m amazed by what Elizabeth has done. She is the most inspiring student I’ve met, and I know she’ll use the money well.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Is it so very different than Dave Tolmie’s parents’ work in Tanzania, or our Neal School project in North Chicago, or a thousand other ministries this congregation does to bring life and hope?

Maybe you’re thinking that none of this talk about money applies to you. Maybe you’re thinking that you’ve lost so much of your savings, wiped out your college funds, seen your retirement nose-dive. As someone put it, “we’ve all seen our supposed security dwindle below our imagining.” Because people come to me for help, I’ve seen the devastation this economy has had on many, the way some of you now find yourselves in places you never imagined. But I’ve also had the privilege of helping in the name of Christ – using the generosity of this church to tide a mortgage over, to keep a car running, sharing from an anonymous gift of \$10,000 from a member who wanted to help people from this church crushed by this economy. And I’ve had the honor of using connections here to link job-seekers with possibilities; using the community of this church to break the isolation for a group of guys together

who find themselves unemployed or underemployed. And through all this, as difficult as it has been, people have responded with more trust in God's love than ever before. One man said, "Thank you for your faith in our family." Another said "I have discovered again discovered that I am not alone. We have hope through the love of Jesus Christ in this place" They have experienced that: "Our ultimate security, our eternal life, lies not in our wealth but in Jesus Christ. [In this season] we may find ourselves more dependent upon God and in closer proximity to Jesus' love without all the stuff in between."^{iv}

There are too many things that can get in the way of us taking Jesus up on his offer to follow him. Image. Dependencies. Money. But Jesus keeps looking at us with love anyway. He keeps inviting us to join him anyway. Again and again and again he keeps asking us to unclench our grasp and trust in him, into free and joyous and buoyant life with him. Amen.

ⁱ Cited by Dean Thompson in his unpublished paper for the 2000 Moveable Feast, Stony Point, New York

ⁱⁱ Told in a discussion of this passage at the 2000 Moveable Feast, Stony Point, New York

ⁱⁱⁱ *Emory Magazine*, Summer 2007, cited by Agnes Norfleet in her unpublished paper for the 2009 Moveable Feast, Santa Fe, New Mexico

^{iv} I credit Agnes Norfleet for these insights from her 2009 Moveable Feast paper.