

HARD WORDS FROM JESUS

Mark 10:17-31

There was this little girl who was sick with a rare disease. The doctor's tried to cure her, but she kept getting thinner and lighter in complexion. The doctor called the other family members into a private discussion room. There the doctor explained that, to fight this disease, the young girl would need a blood transfusion by someone who had been cured of that same disease. Since her brother had already overcome that particular disease, and he had the same blood type, he was the ideal donor. The doctor persuaded the young child to donate his blood to his sister, although the young boy was very quiet. As the doctor waited for a response the small boy, with his bottom lip trembling, finally said, "Ok, I'll do it." The doctors wheeled the two children down the hall to the hospital room. Not one word was exchanged. Only a few times did the young boy look at his sister, and as their eyes met, he simply smiled at her. The two children finally reached the room and were placed into two chairs beside each other. The doctor started the procedure for the blood transfusion. The young boy watched his blood go from his body into his sister's. Trying to hold back the tears, he finally broke the silence with, "Doctor, when am I going to die?" The doctor then realized why his lips were trembling, and why he remained so silent. To the young boy, giving his blood meant giving his life. At that one moment, that one instant, he would have given his life for his sister. This story comes from one of the Chicken Soup for the Soul series, and there is some question as to whether or not this is a true story. What is important with this story is that the little boy was quite prepared to give his all, literally to his sister. He was willing to give 100% of his life for her.

This brings me already to our Gospel lesson this morning from Mark. This is a very well-known Biblical account which appears also in Matthew 19:16-22 and Luke 18:18-23. In a nutshell, as presented by the text from Mark 10:17, a man approaches Jesus and asks him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to have eternal life." Jesus responds by restating to the man the basic commandments which every Jew knew well. Jesus starts with numbers 6-9 of the 10 Commandments – do not murder, do not commit adultery, steal, or tell lies about others. Jesus then adds an extra one – do not cheat and then goes back to number 5 – respect your mother and father. It is very interesting that He makes no reference to the first four Commandments – putting God first, no idols, not taking God's name in vain, and the Sabbath, and number 10 – covetousness. The first four commandments are sometimes called "Vertical" because they pertain to humankind's relationship with God. The rest of the commandments are sometimes called "Horizontal" because they pertain to how human beings relate to each other.

I can almost hear the man letting out a huge sigh of relief: "Teacher, I have obeyed all these commandments since I was a young man." Then the proverbial shoe drops as Jesus looked at him closely, and tells him, "There is one more thing you still need to do. Go sell everything you own. Give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven. Then, you can come with me." How did the man respond?? Yes, he went away, sadly, for he was a very rich man. Christian tradition has assumed that he went away sorrowful because he was unwilling to sell all that he had, give it to the poor, and follow Jesus. What if, however, he went away sorrowful because he had decided he would sell all his possessions and follow Jesus? Sometimes following Jesus is truly not easy.

Before co-founding Habitat for Humanity, Millard Fuller was a successful businessman who followed his estranged wife Linda to New York to try to convince her to come back to him. She was not easily convinced that he could turn back from his headlong rush for material wealth. Millard recalls: "We were in a taxi right after Linda and I had a very tearful session. We'd gone to Radio City Music Hall and they showed the movie *Never Too Late*. It was about a woman's getting pregnant after she thought it was too late. The message was that it's never too late to change anything. I had a sensation of light in that taxi. It was not anything spooky. All I can say is it just came into my head: Give your money away, make yourself poor again and throw yourself on God's mercy. I turned to Linda and said, 'I believe that God just gave me the idea to give all our money away; give everything away.' "She said, 'I agree. Let's do it.'" Friends, family, even pastors tried to talk them out of it. "I told them no, if I think about it I won't do it, because it's not logical. But I believe that God is calling us to do this."

And sacrifice comes in many forms... Two wealthy Christians, a lawyer and a merchant, joined a party that was traveling around the world. In Korea one day, they saw, in a field by the side of the road, a boy pulling a rude plow, while an old man held the plow handles and directed it. The lawyer was amused and took a snapshot of the scene. "That's a curious picture! I suppose they are very poor," he said to the missionary, who was an interpreter and guide to the party. "Yes," was the reply. "That is the family of Chi Noui. When the church was being built they were eager to give something to it, but they had no money; so they sold their only ox and gave their money to the church. This spring they are pulling the plow themselves." The lawyer and the businessman by his side were silent for some moments. Then the businessman said, "That must have been a real sacrifice." "They did not call it that," said the missionary. "They thought it was fortunate that they had an ox to sell."

At this point, the text and Jesus are focused on the man giving up his possessions 100%. Jesus is making some pretty harsh demands of someone who sincerely wants to grow deeper in his faith. Most congregations I have served and most persons with whom I am acquainted really have struggled little with this passage because quite simply – by Western standards they are not wealthy. Which is why verses 29-31 are quite interesting. Jesus again mentions giving up material possessions, but he has added giving up family – brothers, sisters, mother, father even children to follow him. This is not the first time Jesus calls us to put him first, family second.

Hear this passage from Matthew 10 – "Don't think I came to bring peace to the earth! I came to bring trouble, not peace. I came to turn sons against their fathers, daughters against their mothers, and daughters-in-law against their mothers-in-law. Your worst enemies will be in your own family. If you love your father or mother or even your sons and daughters more than me, you are not fit to be my disciples. And unless you are willing to take up your cross and follow me, you are not fit to be my disciples. If you try to save your life, you will lose it. But if you give it up for me, you will surely find it."

Then there is also the story in Luke 9 starting with verse 57 "Along the way someone said to Jesus, 'I'll follow you anywhere!'" Jesus said, "Foxes have dens, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man doesn't have a place to call his own." Jesus told someone else to come with him. But the man said, "Lord, let me wait until I bury my father." Jesus answered, "Let the dead take care of the dead, while you go and

tell about God's kingdom.” Then someone said to Jesus, “I want to follow you, Lord, but first let me go back and take care of things at home.” Jesus answered, “Anyone who starts plowing and keeps looking back isn't worth a thing to God's kingdom!” The first shall be last and the last shall be first; if you try to save your life, you will lose it; but if you give it up for me, you will surely find it. I find these to be hard, hard words of Jesus; hard to hear, hard to understand and very hard to follow literally. Even though I have lifted these verses from the full context of the reading, there are some tremendous parallels which can be made between these scriptures and today's story of the rich young man. Jesus does not want our 10, 15 or even 20%...Jesus wants a full 100% from each of us. And when we look at the original 10 Commandments indeed the very first is what? I am the Lord thy God; thou shalt have no other Gods before me. We do not get to family relationships until way down on the fourth commandment to Honor thy Mother and Father. Yet, I do believe every person here; including your Pastor has always put family first.

Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun, explains that in ancient times, to be a Christian community meant to defy Roman imperialism, to stretch Judaism, to counter pagan values with Christian ones. Real discipleship meant the rejection of emperor worship, the foreswearing of animal sacrifice, the inclusion of Gentiles, the elimination of dietary laws, the acceptance of women and the supplanting of law with love, of nationalism with universalism. Being disciples in the world today is no less challenging. For Chittister, it implies a commitment to be in our world what Jesus was for his: healer and prophet, voice and heart, call and sign of the God whose design for this world is justice and love. It infers, implies, and requires of us the confirming love Jesus had for everyone, everywhere — regardless of who might try to draw limits around the love of God. Being a disciple means working to make life better for others, going beyond our lives to improve the lives of others. “To follow Jesus is to follow one who turns the world upside down,” says Chittister.

So what? What do we do with these teachings of Jesus? I think the first thing we need to remember comes from verse 27 – there are some things that people cannot do, speaking of salvation; but God can do anything. I believe every single day, we need to wake up and decide on a daily basis whom we will serve and worship – our jobs, our friends, our families, or our God. Secondly, we need to grasp firmly onto the promises of God in Scripture. As I ponder how to bring this to a close, Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount Matthew 6:25-33 jumped into the forefront of my thoughts. These words will be our closing story for the morning: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

These words have always had special meaning for me. In my life long faith journey, from time to time, I have been challenged to trust God to take care of all our needs. And, I need to be reminded of this from time to time. And now is one of those times in my life. Last week, if you remember, as part of my Pastoral prayer, I boldly asked God to bless Marquis financially so that we can continue to be in ministry to the world and continue to be a blessing in our community. Monday morning when I arrived at the office, Caryn showed me a donation which had just arrived in the mail for \$5,000!! Thank you, Jesus!

As my Chaplain Colleagues and I would tell one another when we faced the daunting task of providing care for the entire hospital, God's got this!! May God add full blessings to the reading, hearing and preaching of God's holy word! And...remember always, that we are in this together. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.