

Delayed Gratification?

Mark 10:17-31

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Let us pray: God of hope, you call us to questions born from your liberation and action on behalf of your mighty works. May the words of our mouths and the meditations upon our hearts be acceptable to you, oh our Rock and Redeemer.

Suppose we are in a dimly lit room. The place might look fairly clean. But install a hundred bulbs of a thousand watts each and put the whole room under a magnifying glass. The place would begin to crawl with all kinds of strange and wonderful little creatures. It would be all you can do to stay there. So, it is with our interior. When God turns up the voltage, our motivation begins to take a wholly different character, and we reach out with great sincerity for the mercy of God and for his forgiveness. That is why trust in God is so important. Without trust we are likely to run away or say, "There must be some better way of going to God."- Thomas Keating

Surely, it is with a desire for oneness with God's peace and justice, and the liberation of the cross, that many of us choose to hold faith and participate in organized religion. And for all of us, clarifying the kinds of questions we hold allows us to find a better way of going to God.

Our scripture today, The Rich Young Ruler, is widely familiar, perhaps as well known as The Good Samaritan. Mark's Gospel is now a series of fast paced healing stories and ethical teachings between he and his disciples. Just before this scripture, Jesus teaches about divorce, gives a warning about the power of sin, and comments about true greatness. What comes after our scripture is a quick admonition of James and John, a healing story, and then Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. This is classical Mark; rapid-fire stories, set in a sequence, meant to culminate in the Resurrection, all the while holding "secret" Jesus' true identity.

“Hold on tight” encourages Mark, “You will not be able guess the way Jesus will take next, or what questions he will ask of you.”

We begin with an earnest question from a devout follower of the law: what must I do to inherit eternal life? This question came from a wealthy young ruler out of respect, he knelt before Jesus, trusting Jesus would give him guidance and unlock a path towards his everlasting life. Like the Gospel of Mark often does, Jesus has an immediately perplexing, if not mysterious answer “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone?”

How frustrating this could have been for the young ruler. He was on bended knee his acknowledging Jesus innately wonderful characteristic of being “good” and his efforts were turned into a teaching moment. Jesus shifted the conversation from immediate concerns to focus upon God’s absolute, sovereign goodness. And In essence Jesus says “Come follow me” and place your hopes in the One Source of all goodness and life.

Perhaps the rich man was wondering: Can’t I even acknowledge something good about you without being corrected? What can I say to get it right? How will you answer my question about my salvation! I am coming to you, right now, teacher, to ask you something specific!”

One theologian comments saying:

Jesus turns the focus away from the petitioner’s concern with his own salvation towards gracious behavior to others. (So) On the one hand, this story clearly raises questions about our attitude and approach towards wealth, if we want to follow Jesus and inherit eternal life. On the other hand, it raises questions about our attitude and approach towards salvation itself. – James J. Thompson

It also raises some pretty difficult questions about the way we approach Jesus, and, under what premise do our curious, human hearts lift up questions and concerns.

This past month I have been using a devotional first with staff, then some church members, based on Luke 1 where Zachariah, John the Baptist father, lifts up a curious song of praise saying:

You, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest One, go ahead of the Lord, preparing his way, letting his people know of salvation, Through the forgiveness of all their sins. The heart of our God is full of mercy, that's why his daylight has dawned from on high. Bringing light to the dark, as we sat in death's shadow, Guiding our feet in the path of peace.

Zachariah's song casts and declares the great reversal coming in the Jesus the Christ who would be Baptized by Zachariah's son, John the Baptist. It was John's relationship to the future which helps us clarify the difference between our "wishes" and "Hopes".

Wishes, it says, are passive and a substitute for action. Wishes are often simply immediate materialist needs or acquisitions, hence "wishing on a star". They can create a kind of infantilized, passive optimism that can paralyze people with happy thoughts and leave them in a fog of complacency.

Hopes though, hold great power. Hope drives us to active engagement of the future. And our hopes for the future guide is with how to act. Christian hope, therefore, is perhaps some of the most radical hope one can hold, for Christ was a way-making, change-making, earth-caring, immigrant-welcoming, social-flipping, power-challenging, agent of the living God!

John the Baptist is a good example of having Divine hope. John spent his life in thonged sandals traversing the wilderness. He was weird by human standards: he feasted on wild grasshoppers and honey whose nourishment was brought forth not by his own determination, but by God's grace. When the time came, John would take an active role in the story of Christ, paving an unbroken lineage of baptism that we still practice today. First came fidelity to God, then, came fidelity to socially transformative actions that

stoked a reversal of wealth and power, envisioned by a radical homeless man, Jesus the Christ.

And like the Rich young ruler, John the Baptist was called to make great sacrifices.

There is a difference between wishing and hoping. This young ruler wished for eternal life for himself from his worldly position. Jesus challenged him to hope for a better future, to help topple an oppressive and unjust economic pyramid and show humility before our One, awesome God.

Hope, real hope, the kind of hope that Christ offers us through his resurrection; doesn't care about our worldly position or possessions. Christ's hope speaks to transform and realign our very hearts such that we would offer joy to God- even in death. IN this sense, hope in Christ will often be accompanied by loss in this life, as we are reconfigured to conform to the eternity of the cross. Our very questions of faith, and our values that ascribe true worth- are changed.

I wonder, have you found yourself like the rich young ruler, wishing upon things, holding out a craving and maybe stuck? Have your wishes changed over the course of your life? Do you think what you wish for, is what God knows offers and you need?

Well, this all raises some pretty difficult questions about how we approach Jesus, and, under what premise of "Kingdom" do our curious, human hearts participate in this community of faith. It should. That's why Peter said to him,

"Look, we have left everything and followed you."

To which Jesus replied

"I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the

good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age, and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

Again, Jesus speaks from another place, a re-ordering, the Kingdom, which is actually at hand, but which is still yet to come. I guess if we truly understood that kingdom, truly lived into this kingdom, our words and questions, thoughts and feelings would truly reflect the eternity of love that God has in mind for us.

But that, this is deeply difficult and troubling for us, we people of faith, caught between the finite and infinite. It's hard to see when God turns up the light and maybe we just want to crawl into a corner and hide.

Did you see the northern lights this week? My family did. Our whole family was in the dark field next to our house. Green and red and purple sheets swept down from the sky and drifted overhead, we looked straight into what appeared to be giant angelic undulations of energy and sweeping against a sea of end endless nothing, the stars piercing through the black veil of space. I could not help but think it was like angels visiting us, maybe peering down at us, their wings beating and bringing to earth something cosmic and lovely, and life giving and truly divine. The heavens came to earth that night for me and my family as my children and wife stood in awe. Heaven broke into creation yet again.

Like the early Christians, we believe that with Jesus' death and **resurrection** the Kingdom to Come, has indeed broken into all of creation, including the kingdom of humankind. We are surrounded by of the divine wings of angels and the inescapable love of the Creator coursing through all of creation. He has come down! He is here! His reign is one of justice and action, unending hope, and personal salvation.

This is why trust in God is so important. Without trust we are likely to run away or say, “There must be some better way, some easier way, something

else to hope in or maybe wish upon.” Trusting God amidst our rapid-fire lives and earthly kingdoms is truly a task we are called to undertake.

For Jesus reminds says “Did you not know, have you not heard, Only God is truly good? t’s impossible for mortals, but it’s not impossible for God. All things are possible for God.

Amen.