

Sad Faces and Impossibilities

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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Mark 10:17-31

Jesus stunned his disciples with strict lessons that left little wiggle room. He also stunned them with a broad hospitality that created ample room. Sometimes he knit the two threads together.

As Jesus was setting out on the road, a man ran up to him, fell on his knees, and asked him, “Good teacher, what do I have to do to inherit life in the coming age?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you say that I’m good? No one is good except God. You know the commandments: don’t murder; don’t commit adultery; don’t steal; don’t give false testimony; don’t defraud; honor your father and mother.” He said to him, “Teacher, I’ve kept them all from my childhood.” Jesus looked at him with love and said to him, “You’re missing one thing. Go, sell whatever you own and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me.” But his expression saddened at this, and he went off in sorrow, because he owned a lot.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “It’s going to be so hard for rich people to enter God’s kingdom!” The disciples were astonished by what he was saying. But again Jesus said to them, “Children, it’s so hard to enter God’s kingdom! It’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God’s kingdom.” Now they were completely amazed and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For people it’s impossible, but not for God. Everything is possible for God.”

Peter started saying to him, “Look, we’ve left everything and followed you.” Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, no one who has left a house or brothers or sisters or a mother or a father or children or fields for my sake and for the sake of the good news, will fail to receive, at this present time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and fields a hundred times over – with persecution – and in the coming age, life. But lots of people who are first are going to be last, and the last are going to be first.”

Sermon

It was an embarrassing moment for me. I was a first year student at Calvin Seminary. I was sitting in an introductory systematic theology class. Professor Klooster was lecturing. And I was frustrated. Once again in his lecture it was “a little of this” and “a little of that.” He wouldn’t take a stand. He kept waffling. Every statement he made came with qualifications. But I wanted a straight answer. So I put it to him. I said, “Give me a simple answer to this question! Just tell me ‘yes’ or ‘no!’” And then I asked him an either-or question. “Is it this, or is it that?” It’s hard to answer that kind of question with a ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ Everyone in the classroom got a chuckle out of that one, at my expense. (Funny how I haven’t forgotten that twenty-five years later.) All of you can probably understand my original frustration, though. Sometimes we just want a simple, straight answer. But there is that proverb: “Watch out what you ask for, you may get it.”

A man came to Jesus one day, looking for a straight answer, maybe even a simple one. He had hopes for Jesus, hopes that he could cut through the fog of competing answers. And he fell to his knees before Jesus. This was serious business, and he desperately wanted an answer to his question. So he took the position of a beggar, on his knees before Jesus.

“Good teacher,” he said, honoring Jesus by both words, recognizing that Jesus was a rabbi and a worthy one, at that. Jesus, of course, deflected the adjective. “Why do you say I’m good? No one is good, except God.” Yet with that deflection, Jesus may have been dropping a hint, a hint about his identity, a hint that lays some groundwork for the answer he would give to the man’s question.

Here’s that question: “What do I have to do to inherit life in the coming age?” You’re probably used to a translation that runs this way: “What do I have to do to inherit eternal life?” But the question is not about

eternal life, not the way we usually think of it in the sense of living forever. Rather it's a question about life on the other side of a coming great divide in history.

Some day – and speculation was rife in the first century that the day would come soon – some day God would come to bring a brand new situation, so new and so complete that it could be called a “new creation” or a “new heaven and earth.” Everything broken would be mended. Everything twisted would be straightened. God would be king over all the earth. And Israel would be at the top of the heap of nations. Some day. Some day. And the question was, and it was a critical question, who would get to live some day on the other side of the divide in that new world? Who would get to live there, and how?

All sorts of answers to that question were on offer in the first century, most of them following the same pattern. What do you have to do? Two things. First, follow the law of God, which we have interpreted in exacting detail. Second, join our group, be one of the few. That's how the answers ran, lots of them. And so the man came to Jesus, hoping he would cut through the fog of competing answers, hoping, no doubt, that Jesus would give him a definitive answer he could live with.

Jesus gave him an answer, an answer that was more than he had bargained for. That answer came in two parts: Part 1 and Part 2-a and Part 2-b.

Part 1, like the typical answer, concerned the law of God. Jesus, however, did not offer a detailed explanation or an exacting interpretation of the law. He simply referred to the commandments, to five of the ten anyway, with an extra one thrown in for good measure: “don't murder; don't commit adultery; etc.,” along with “don't defraud.” The man responded to this right away. “Teacher, I've been doing all these since I was a kid!” Jesus didn't argue with the man. He accepted his response. In fact, when Jesus looked at the man, he felt a surge of love for him. This man had some integrity. But something was missing. And that brings us to Part 2-a.

Jesus had left out the tenth commandment – “don't covet” – which is the commandment about wealth and possessions. He had left out that commandment, but now he zeroed in on it. “You're missing one thing,” he said. “Go, sell whatever you own and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.” “Treasure in heaven” means resources for “life in the coming age.” Jesus is telling the man, in other words, “Do this, and you will satisfy your deep desire for life.” But this man “owned a lot,” and he couldn't let go of it. What he owned represented his life in this present time, maybe it even formed his life. He treasured it all. It was precious to him. He couldn't let go of it, whether it was an inheritance or the result of his own hard work.

That was Part 2-a. I doubt the man even heard Part 2-b. But Jesus said it anyway. Every other answer spelled out all of God's law, carefully interpreted. Every other answer said, “Join with us, be one of the few.” Jesus, on the other hand, simply said, “Come and follow me.” And it's important to note that he said this after leaving out not just the commandment about coveting, which he covered in Part 2-a, but also the first four commandments: “have no other gods; make no idols, no images; honor the divine name; keep the Sabbath, the day of rest.” Jesus mentioned none of these to the man, mentioned none of them because all of them are rightly interpreted and rightly kept through Jesus, by following him. Jesus, with the Father and the Spirit, is God. Jesus is the image of the invisible God, God made visible in the flesh. Jesus embodies the meaning of the divine name; he is “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). And Jesus is the one in whom the children of God will find their rest.

The way to find life in the coming age is not to join a self-selected group that strictly adheres to a detailed interpretation of God's law, but rather to join with all those who follow Jesus, jettisoning every idol that stands in the way. This the man who owned a lot was not prepared to do. Which was no surprise to Jesus. “It's hard for a rich person to enter God's kingdom,” he said. And that was a stunning statement. Wealth has always been about power, about privilege, about a place at the front of the line, even at the front of God's line. The disciples were shocked to learn otherwise, and they figured that if blessed rich people couldn't enter the kingdom, then no one could. But Jesus assured them of the possibility of impossibilities.

The disciples themselves, for example, had already begun to live the answer to the rich man's questions. They had left everything to follow Jesus. Sure, none of them had been rich, but they left behind what they treasured most: home, family, job, a safe anonymity. And they all had done the very un-Hobbit-like thing of joining Jesus for an adventure. Along the way, their family would grow to thousands of

brothers and sisters. Along the way, they would have countless spiritual children. And along the way, their horizons would stretch in every direction, over fields and mountains and oceans. But there would be trouble, too. Many would suffer; some would die. Yet in the end, when history would be divided, they would live on in God's new world.

That's how it would be, Jesus said. The tighter anyone holds on to life now – holds on to physical life, holds on to people, holds on to property, holds on to safety – the tighter anyone holds on to life now, the less grip they will have on the life to come. But, Jesus said, those who let go now will be blessed forever.

So, where does that leave us? Well, here's a question to ponder: "What do I hold on to more tightly than I hold on to Jesus?" Each of us can and ought to ask ourselves that question.

The rich man held tightly to what he owned, and he owned a lot. What kind of grip do you have on your car? What kind of grip do you have on your house? What kind of grip do you have on your video game console? What kind of grip do you have on the next thing you just have to buy? Or flip it around. What kind of grip do those things have on you?

Paul the Apostle warns about the love of money. But is that the love we have for money, or the love money has for us? It's both actually. Our possessions can possess us. In fact, they want to possess us, want to fill our minds and our hearts, want to become the focus of our thoughts and our desires.

I'm in the middle of re-reading Silas Marner. It's a great story. In the first part of the book, Marner is turned inward. His money has claimed the corner on his affections. He takes out his gold pieces every night, arranges them on his table, and counts them or just admires them. The money makes him do it. It calls to him every evening. In the latter part of the book, Marner welcomes a stray child into his life and is transformed. Before that could happen, however, money's grip on Marner had to be broken. And it was, when all his money was stolen, which turned out to be the second best thing that ever happened to him.

What has a grip on you? on me? – such a grip that it keeps us from really welcoming Jesus, either because it keeps us preoccupied or because it won't let Jesus near, because the light of his presence would reveal the darkness of what holds us? What has a grip on you and me?

Maybe it's money. Maybe it's what we own. Maybe it's what we want own, what we just have to have. Or maybe it's some thing or some one that we can't give up. "What do I hold on to more tightly than I hold on to Jesus? That's the question. That's the question, a question we might put to Jesus this way: "Jesus, what do I need to let go of?"

Of course, when we ask Jesus for a simple, straight answer, he may oblige us. And we may not like that at all. We may start to walk away with a sad face, muttering under our breath, "Impossible!" Sure, impossible for people. But not for God. Everything is possible for God! And it's the road of possible impossibilities – which is the road Jesus took himself – it's the road of possible impossibilities that leads to life in God's kingdom.

Jesus is calling you and me to join him and all the others on that road. Jesus is calling. Can you hear his voice over all the background noise, over all the static? Jesus is calling. Can you hear his voice clear as a bell, because it's the voice of the one you love the best? Jesus is calling.