

Traveling Light

Mark 10:17-31 *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."*

A man runs up to Jesus and asks, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He wants assurance about the ultimate meaning and security of his life. He wants to know that his life is on firm footing, not just now but in the grand scheme of things. Eternal life can mean life after death, and maybe that's what the man was asking about. And yet Jesus always talks about eternal life in terms of the here and now. For Jesus, eternal life means a way of living that is in harmony with God and the purpose for which we were created.

We all want to inherit eternal life. We want to feel that our lives matter, that our living is connected to what is true and good and lasting. Maybe we also want to know that there is something beyond our brief earthly lives, that when we die, it is not simply over--nothing, no more. More than that, however, we want to feel that our lives are meaningful here and now, that there is more to life than the passing fancies and passions, or the fleeting accomplishments that seem to evaporate in our hands as soon as we have them. So this man's question is ours, too.

Jesus takes his question seriously. First, Jesus takes issue with the way this man addressed him. "Why do you call me good?" asks Jesus. "No one is good but God alone." Here and in other places in the gospels, Jesus points attention away from himself to God. It is as though he is saying, "It is not about me. It is about God and your relationship with God." Forget goodness. Only God is good. Jesus removes from us the whole business of "being good." What a relief! We can let go of the "good boy, bad boy," "good girl, bad girl" thing. Forget about "good guys" and "bad guys." Jesus doesn't talk that way.

Many of us grew up with problems related to "being good." People have drilled into us that "being good" is supposed to be our goal—parents, teachers, religious leaders. It leads to all sorts of problems and psycho-emotional baggage. Guilt. Perfectionism. Anger at ourselves that turns into depression because we don't measure up to someone's definition of goodness that got stuck in our minds.

Jesus relieves us of all that. No one is good but God. Jesus is not about building a personality cult around himself. That's ego stuff, and it gets in the way of our true calling as human beings created by God. Jesus isn't about attaching people to himself or having people worship him. He is calling people to follow him in the life of faithfulness to God, the life that fulfills who we really are. As we travel this inward and outward journey of following Jesus, we are on the path of transcending our own egos and all the pain they

cause us. Not having to seek or get people's adoration or praise. Not having to have constant affirmation. So much of our suffering comes from the ways that we hang our sense of self-worth on others' opinions of us. It is the most liberating thing in the world to discover a way of living that is not obstructed by our constant, sometimes subconscious, need to be the center of attention.

So Jesus says, Forget about being good. Let's focus on something more important and more fulfilling, this eternal life you asked about. Trying to be "good" is not what the life of faith is about. The life of faith is about being faithful. You know the commandments. Jesus ticks them off. Of course I know them, says the man. I have kept them since I was a kid. Jesus is saying to the man that he already knows the path of eternal life. It lies in being faithful to God's commandments. It lies along the path of right living. But Jesus sees something else in the man, a longing, an uneasiness. Just keeping the commandments has not led the man to a deep and vital relationship with God, has not enabled the life of faith to take hold of his whole being. Now Mark writes what is to me the most poignant sentence in the story: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him." Jesus looks deep into the man's heart and his desire to live the fullest life possible. He knows there is something more that this man needs to do to experience the eternal life he is asking after.

You lack one thing. Go and sell what you own, and give the proceeds to the poor. Get rid of your money, your possessions. They are in the way. You are all tangled up in them. Material things are only for the purpose of sharing so that everyone has enough of what they need. So get rid of your stuff and help those who don't have enough. I don't think Jesus was a very good fundraiser according to our standards. He didn't try to coddle or schmooze the wealthy so they would feel good about giving. His approach was simple and straightforward. You have more than you need. Get rid of it so that those who don't have enough will have what they need.

Then, says Jesus, come and follow me. Get rid of your attachments. Then you are ready to follow me in a commitment to the life of loving God and being faithful to what God is calling you to do. First, we let go, get rid of, and then we are ready to follow Jesus in the life that is truly rich, truly worth having. Back in the summer Phil Boyce and I were talking about how some people come here to be involved in the camp or the church, and they get hooked. They move on to what Buddhists call "right livelihood," compassionate work that serves people and the earth. It is what Jesus understood as eternal life discovered as we live the life of commitment and faithfulness. Such a life doesn't put us on a path to prosperity. Phil laughed and said that 4415 Boonsboro Road is the gateway to poverty!

Jesus helps us look at our attachments to things that seem to give us a sense of security. Yet those very things block our discovery of true security, the eternal life the man was asking for. There is something more, something deeper, something more real than all the stuff we are told makes for a meaningful life. It is living not for ourselves but for others and for the world itself.

The story doesn't end happily. The man is "shocked" by Jesus' response. He turns away grieving because he is so attached to his possessions. Here is why it is so important that Mark inserted the comment that Jesus looked lovingly at him. Jesus doesn't fuss at the guy. He doesn't lecture him about his unreadiness to give up his attachments. Jesus knows that it is hard for us to let go of the things we have become so attached to, the things that stand in the way of the very life we seek. He has compassion for us.

Jesus now says to the disciples, "How hard it is for a rich person to enter God's kingdom!" Then he goes further, "How hard it is for anyone to enter God's kingdom!" It isn't easy. It takes something on our part. It takes a willingness to make changes in ourselves, to look at the things we are attached to, material or not. Our attachments may be to attitudes or patterns of behavior that have become comfortable but get in the way of living the life of God's kingdom here and now. We carry around baggage that won't fit through the narrow gate to life as God made it to be lived. We have to travel light when we follow Jesus.

This sounds just too hard! The disciples whisper to each other, "Then who in the world can be saved? Who can live this life Jesus is talking about?" Jesus overhears them and says, "For us mortal human beings, it is not possible. But with God, everything is possible." We can only do it with God's help, God's grace and love. This sounds completely paradoxical, if not downright contradictory. Jesus says we have to let go of our attachments. Then he says it is very hard. Only God can make this possible.

There is a Zen Buddhist term I have found very helpful. It is called "effortless effort." I think it is close to the spiritual attitude Jesus helps us have. We work with the spiritual disciplines or practices of prayer, study, giving, worship, and being "on mission" with what we feel God is calling us to do. We take our commitments and practices very seriously and keep at them. At the same time, we do it as though everything does not depend on us. We practice with an open and peaceful heart to receive the help God's spirit gives us. We must do it ourselves, but we don't do it on our own. We must make every effort to live the life to which Jesus calls us. At the same time, we always seek God's spirit and grace. I think that is the spirit Jesus is calling forth in us. It is very hard to enter the kingdom of God, this life that has the quality of "eternal." We must make every effort. At the same time, we can only do it with God's help. This is "effortless effort."

Finally, Peter says to Jesus, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." These first disciples of Jesus' had left everything—jobs, families, homes, respectability, success in the eyes of the world. I sense deep emotion in Peter as he sees what they have given up in order to follow Jesus. Maybe he is feeling the emotional and spiritual pain of having done so. At the same time, he clings desperately to Jesus' words and the way that Jesus has opened up for them to walk. It is so hard. And yet it is still what he and the others want. Is it worth it? Is it real? Can we trust it still?

Jesus says to Peter and the others: Believe me, no one who has left everything else to follow me and to live this life of the good news of God's kingdom and God's love will be without everything they want and need—houses, families, fields. He adds “with persecutions,” perhaps because he knew that there would be struggles and opposition and even suffering along the way. But Jesus also knew that even these can become blessings, a source of spiritual wealth and growth. Leaving behind everything, all your attachments, Jesus is saying, will mean that you will be free to receive everything you need and more.

Following Jesus means traveling lighter and lighter. Many years ago our family took our vacation at Holden Beach, N. C., where we have gone nearly every summer as the one time when we can be together. Shelley and Kent were very young. Kent was into his Michael Jackson phase. So the first evening, when we took a walk down the beach, Kent wore the whole outfit—a black vest and shirt, a bandanna, a studded leather bracelet. As we walked, he strutted closer to the water. One by one, the cumbersome items of clothing came off until he was running and jumping in the surf, free and happy, delighting in the water, the setting sun, and himself. That's an image I like for this business of letting go so that we can enter fully the life of God's kingdom here and now.

The letting go part is difficult and ongoing for us. Yet Jesus is always there, looking at us with love, compassion, and patience. As difficult as the letting go can be, we soon realize that there is no other journey we would rather be on. It is the journey of eternal life, both now and forever.