

October 11, 2009/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

## 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 seems anxious to know that his life is ultimately meaningful and secure. Eternal life could mean life after death, and maybe that's what the man was asking about. Yet Jesus always talks about eternal life in terms of the here and now, a way of living that is in harmony with God and the purpose for which we were created. That is life now AND forever.

We all want to inherit eternal life. We want to feel that our lives matter and are connected to what is true and good and lasting. We want to feel that our lives are meaningful, that there is more to life than the passing fancies and passions, or the fleeting accomplishments that evaporate in our hands as soon as we have them. So this man's question is ours, too.

First, Jesus takes issue with the way the man addresses him. "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." Here and in other places in the gospels, Jesus directs our 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." Parents, teachers, or religious leaders drilled into us that "being good" is to be our goal. This 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. Anger at others, who may remind us of some authority figure that gave us approval only when we "were good". The "being good" mentality also leads to getting caught up in what amounts to worshiping certain people we consider "good," and then the inevitable disillusionment when they fall

from grace.

Jesus relieves us of all that. No one is good but God, even Jesus. Jesus is not 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 is not 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 egos and all the pain they cause us. Not having to seek people's adoration or praise. Not needing to have constant affirmation. Not having to have people agree with us. 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 constantly tripped up by our need to be the center of attention. It is living from the inside out, not the outside in.

So Jesus says, Forget about being good. Let's focus on something more fulfilling, this eternal life you asked about. The life of faith is not about "being good" but 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, a way of life. 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 seeking. And yet, it is going to be difficult, even painful.

You lack one thing. Go and sell everything 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. Jesus was a lousy fund raiser according to our standards. He didn't try to coddle or schmooze people so they would feel good or important about giving. His approach was 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 so that you can live the very life you say you are looking for. 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 of, and then we are ready to follow Jesus in the life that is truly rich, truly worth having. A couple of years ago Phil Boyce, Camp Kum-Ba-Yah Director, and I were talking about how some people come here to be involved in the camp or the church, and they get hooked. They are looking for what Buddhists call “right livelihood,” compassionate work that serves people and the earth. It is why some work for one of the ministries that have grown out of our life, receiving a fraction of the salary they might have in more "normal" situations. It is why some spend countless hours and go through many struggles with little or no pay. It is what Jesus understood as eternal life, discovered as we live the life of commitment and faithfulness to callings that arise from deep within our spirits. Such a life does not put us on a path to prosperity. Phil laughed and said that 4415 Boonsboro Road is the gateway to poverty! I think that none of us has given up everything in the way Jesus challenges this man. We need to be honest about that. Yet I think, at the same time, we are trying to be on that path, and I hope we continue to get closer to all of this business Jesus is talking about.

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 to which we have become so attached, 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 to which we are attached, material or otherwise. 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. Religion can be such an attachment. Even "spirituality" can be an attachment. Attachments are any

distractions that keep us from making the hard decisions and choices that put us on the path of the life to which Jesus calls us, the life of discipleship in the world. We have to travel light when we follow Jesus.

This sounds just too hard! The disciples gasp: "Then who in the world can be saved? Who can live this life Jesus is talking about?" Jesus responds, "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 with God's help can we do it.

There is a term (Zen Buddhist) I have found very helpful. It is called "effortless effort." I think it is close to the spiritual attitude to which Jesus is pointing. 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 strain of having done so. He and the others are clinging 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? Sometimes, on the way of living what we call the inward and outward journey of faith, we feel as though we are on a high wire, out in thin air. We look at the world around us that offers so many promises of security through other things, a world, a way of living that we have left, or are leaving, behind. And we find ourselves feeling breathless and anxious. I think that is what living our lives

as a journey of faith IS about, always stepping out, always leaving false securities, always remaining open to being led. Here we need to remember that faith is not about beliefs that we cling to but a life that we live.

Jesus says to Peter and the others: Believe me, no one who has left everything to follow me in this life of the good news of God's kingdom and God's love will be without everything they need—houses, families, fields. He adds “with persecutions” 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. Jesus is not talking about a "gospel of prosperity," which is so popular today, that if you only believe, you'll have everything you want! He's talking about trustful living. I lay beside this Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, about the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. They are not anxious, yet they have everything they need. Learn from them.

Following Jesus means traveling lighter and lighter. Many years ago our family took our first vacation at Holden Beach, N. C., where we have gone almost every year as the one time when we can all be together. Shelley and Kent were very young. The first evening, Shelley in our arms, Kent striding ahead of us, we took a walk down the beach. Kent, then about five years old, was into his Michael Jackson phase. He wore the whole outfit—a black vest and t-shirt, a bandanna, a studded leather bracelet, sunglasses. As we walked, he strutted closer and closer to the water. One by one, the cumbersome items of clothing came off and were handed to his mother. Before long Kent 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. We continue becoming aware of and then dropping our attachments, one by one, not knowing exactly where it is all leading. Yet Jesus is always there, looking with love, compassion, and patience. As difficult as the letting go can be, we realize with growing joy that there is no other journey we would rather be on. It is the journey of eternal life, both now and forever.