

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Mark 10: 17-31  
October 11, 2009  
The Reverend Sally Johnston

When the man in today's Gospel story approached Jesus and questioned him about how to gain eternal life, the assumption in his question was that there must be things he needed to do to earn the reward. "I'm already doing the basics," said the young man. "What else do I need to do?"

It was an ethical question: "What good deeds or work will assure my ultimate reward?" Jesus looked at him with love. This man truly believed he needed to take on something more, and he was ready, but Jesus' reply suggested a far more difficult task. Instead of taking on something new, he was to divest himself of what he had worked so hard to accumulate.

"It's good that you've done those things and kept the law," Jesus told him. "Now the next step in the journey (to eternal life, or life with God) is non-attachment to whatever or whomever possesses you; whatever or whomever holds your attention, your worry, your time, your primary concern. Go sell everything you have, give the money to the poor; then you'll be rich with heavenly treasure and you'll be ready - and able - to follow me."

This isn't the confrontational Jesus, and he wasn't trying to make the man feel guilty. It was the young man who had come seeking answers, and Jesus, being Jesus, tells him the truth. No, this is a loving Jesus, coaching this well-intentioned seeker to the next level of life with God.

We don't know what his possessions consisted of. Perhaps they included some cattle or a grove of fig trees. Maybe he owned extra tunics or several pairs of sandals. Perhaps he had servants who waited on him or a wine cellar envied by all his neighbors. Whatever his possessions were, he loved them, and the thought of giving them up was distressing. Instead of saying he had many possessions, however, we might say he was possessed by many things.

In biblical times, the sick were often seen as being possessed by demons. When Jesus cured the sick, he exorcised, or eliminated, the demons. The man seeking eternal life had done many good things, but his possessions had become idols and false gods. Jesus gave him a choice to exorcise himself; to heal himself by casting out the demons that controlled his life and made him sick with the fever of accumulation.

In order to follow Jesus, to be a disciple (a disciplined one) the young man needed to divest himself of his whole life portfolio – his property, his status and his sources of privilege and power. And perhaps even more than his possessions, he would have to give up some predictability in his life and a lot of control, opening himself to vulnerability and uncertainty possibly for the first time. Divesting ultimately meant that he, too, would be dependent upon the willingness of others to share what they had.

Let's reframe this story. I want you to imagine we're going on a hike with Jesus as the trail leader. We show up and have on our boots, carrying light jackets and a daypack with some water, and one of us has brought a Costco-size package of granola bars. Jesus would probably stop us right there: "Don't you think one is enough? Don't you remember what I did with the loaves and the fish? We'll travel light on this hike and depend upon one another. Now, here comes the young man who wants to join us on the hike. Oh my, look at him."

The young man zips up on his Segway, carrying a large backpack and sleeping bag, and pulling an ice chest. "Sorry I'm late, but I wanted to be totally prepared. I had to go back and get my wallet and American Express card, but now I'm set to go. Just tell me which way to point this scooter and I'll be glad to lead the way!"

Jesus looked at him and smiled and loved him in spite of himself. “Well, young man, if you want to follow me on this trail, you’ll have to leave some of that stuff here. And your Blackberry, too. There’s not going to be time or any situation where texting your friends or checking your calendar will help with the hike. Still want to go? Still want to be my disciple? Drop the gear and the distractions. Cut back to what’s essential for the hike and then you’re more than welcome to come along.”

When the young man heard what all he would have to give up, he decided not to go on the hike after all, because he was possessed by many things. Jesus was sorry to see him leave, but as he explained to the rest of us, “He’s got a lot of stuff that puts him first in the line-up of who’s accumulated the most. But where we’re going, that’s just baggage, and he won’t be able to keep up nor understand the importance of sharing among ourselves and how we build community. We’ll put our trust in God and not accumulated baggage. He may get there, but it’s going to take a long time.”

In the economy of Jesus, we share not because we’re obedient and expecting a reward, but because it allows us to enter into a deeper relationship with God and with others. And that is how we get glimpses of the Kingdom of God. Becoming “dispossessed” means becoming available to God. In fact, what Jesus prescribed was not simply divesting, but trading up, for something of greater value.

The wealthy man thought he could “buy” his way into heaven by doing the next good and righteous things, but he was possessed by his possessions. When we burden ourselves with attachment to possessions, like the rich man, we’re left wondering how to get out of our self-constructed prisons and join Jesus on life’s hiking trail. The way out, though, is through giving up, becoming a disciplined one, and sharing with those who need the “more than enough” that we have.

To quote the great theologian Janis Joplin, “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.” Taking that to heart, we can hear Jesus urging us onward, to take the next step, to drop the attachment, to let it go, and take another step. Pretty soon, we’re hiking. Without baggage. In doing so, we free ourselves truly to become disciples. We have nothing significant to lose and everything of value to gain.

Amen