

Leaving it All Behind

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on October 10, 2021
Friendship Presbyterian Church

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud; honor your father and mother." He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." 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." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly 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—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." (Mark 10:17-31, NRSV)

After all this time, you know by now that I love great poetry, and there is no poet I love more than my "Uncle Walt" – that is, Walt Whitman. And there are no lines of his verse which reach into my soul like these, these opening lines from his "Song of the Open Road":

*Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.*

*Henceforth I ask not good fortune, I myself am good fortune,
Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing,
Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms,
Strong and content I travel the open road.*

[*"Song of the Open Road", from Leaves of Grass*]

Have you ever thought about just leaving everything behind, saying goodbye to your life as you've known it, and launching out into the unknown? Late at night sometimes, Lisa and I fantasize about such a thing: To settle our affairs, say goodbye to our friends, pull all our money out of savings and get a camper, and just ... *go*. (Don't worry, it's not going to happen anytime soon!). But it is sometimes fun to think about – the thought of going *anywhere*, going *everywhere* ... working in a roadside diner on Route 66 for a few weeks if we need money, but otherwise not worrying about such matters very much ... To be *free*.

In some respects, it's a self-indulgent fantasy, but it's more than that. Its powerful appeal bears witness to how easy it is for any of us, in the midst of the duties and responsibilities of life, to feel like we're missing something ... That we can be so busy *making* a living that we miss *living*. We can get so wrapped up in *sustaining* a life, that we forget what we're living *for*.

In today's gospel text we hear the story of a man who seeks out Jesus because he's in search of a freedom and life that he hasn't found. We're told that he's a *rich* man – a rich *young* man, one of the other gospels adds. He sets out to find Jesus, not to shirk his responsibilities that afternoon, but because he *has* lived a life of duties and responsibilities (and done it quite well apparently), and yet finds Jesus' teaching on the *Kingdom*, on living the life that matters, elusive. He knows that for all his efforts and success, he hasn't found what he's looking for.

But surely, Jesus – if anyone – *must* know what he's missing. And so, convinced that Jesus can help him, he searches for him, finds him, and in a mix of respect and desperation, kneels before him: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"What must I *do*?" he asks, for after all, *doing* is what he knows. And so, he is prepared to keep on *doing* when Jesus calls his attention to the commandments of God. And he answers that he has kept them – with diligence and seriousness. Now while you and I might have a hard time saying that with a straight face, we are given no reason in the text to think that *this* young man is insincere or trying to pass himself off as something he isn't. He just knows that for all his hard work ... for all his commitment ... for all his determination to do the right things ... that the life which Jesus is talking about is still beyond his grasp.

What follows is one of the most simple and beautiful details in all the gospels: Jesus, looking at him, *loved him*, and responded to him. I've always been moved by this ... the thought that this young man's sincerity of soul and desire to do the right thing touched Jesus in the heart ... and that the gospel writer deemed it important enough to include.

Jesus knew that this young man was serious, but that he had still not found what he was looking for. And as he peered deeply, with wisdom, into this young man's heart, his own heart swelled with compassion, for he knew *why* the young man had not yet found it:

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." (Mark 10:21, NRSV)

And when the rich young man heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. He had come seeking the *one thing he still had to do*, only to discover that he couldn't bring himself to do it.

In understanding this story, it is easy to get hung up on the question of whether this call to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor, is a call intended *only* for this particular young man, or for *all* would-be disciples (though *it is* telling how much we may have invested in the answer!). But however one comes down on this, there can be *no* question – given what follows – that this story obviously challenges our easy compromises with possessions and the hold which they have over us, whether we are willing to admit them or not.

But getting hung up here can distract us from seeing something else going on. The fact is, Jesus calls the young man to do something that Jesus *must* know he can't bring himself to do. I believe Jesus does this for a reason, for he knows that the young man is failing to find what he seeks – not because he hasn't done *enough*, but because in his obsession with his doing, *he's asking the wrong question*.

As he likely had inherited riches from his family, he now seeks out Jesus to learn the secret to inheriting *true life* ... what *conditions* he needs to fulfill. He asks, "What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?" – for his whole life had been about *doing* ... about achieving, succeeding, about measuring up. And of course, there is nothing wrong about achieving, about succeeding. But his own words reveal him.

It is telling that right before this story in this 10th chapter of Mark, Jesus is blessing children who are brought to him, and when the disciples speak sternly to them (as if they were wasting Jesus' time), we are told that Jesus was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; *for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs*. Truly I tell you, *whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.*" (Mark 10:14-15, NRSV)

"What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?" What Jesus would have the young man see, by giving him to do the *one* thing he *can't* bring himself to do, is that one doesn't inherit the Kingdom and eternal life by *doing* anything! One stands to *inherit* the Kingdom simply *by allowing oneself to be a child of the King*. One stands to inherit eternal life simply by being a child of the Giver of Life. His obsession with his own efforts, however diligent and sincere, actually hinders him from seeing the truth of *who* he is and *whose* he is, and trusting in God's grace completely. The young man is called to leave it all behind, not in order to fulfill the requirements of eternal life, but so that he might live into the essential truth that that life is a *gift* – something that *cannot* be *earned*, but only *received*.

But to *live into* that truth, for it to take shape in a human life, means a lifetime's journey of letting go, of walking a path on which we learn to trust God in the face of our fears ... fears that we won't *have* enough ... that we *aren't* enough ... that we won't measure up ... that things are

not under our control. And so yes, the challenge for this young man *is* about money and possessions. And the challenge for *all of us* is about anything and everything in our lives to which we desperately cling to validate ourselves, to make us feel worthy in our own or others' eyes.

But what an adventure it would be to learn how to be *free* ... free from fear, free to trust, free to *live*! This is what the call of Jesus is about – to that rich young man long ago, and to us, now. I believe that to embark on such an adventure is ultimately why we are here. And not *just* as individuals, but also as a *community*, as a *family* of faith.

Ever since I was a young boy, I have always loved adventure stories. The word “Adventure” itself stirs up deep feelings and memories. What comes up for you? For so many in my generation, we think of *Star Wars* ... or *Indiana Jones*. Perhaps in your own mind you are swept away to the Wild West, or the high seas, or the forbidding jungle, or out to the depths of space.

And yet, no matter where our minds go, if you think about it, the stories we recall are similar. Joseph Campbell, the renowned scholar of mythology, wrote about this in his classic study, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. He discerned a basic template running through so many of the great adventures, from the labors of Hercules to Frodo bearing the Ring of Power to Mount Doom.

He noticed that in almost all such stories, a protagonist is called to adventure and is faced with the prospect of leaving behind the familiar, safe world. This call is often met with great resistance or deep hesitation, but the “hero” – by choice or not – leaves the familiar behind and enters (or is thrust into) a strange, new world.

Once there, the hero is challenged to the core – “initiated” – facing trials and tests, and even the threat of death itself. But through these struggles the hero passes, and completes the quest – defeating the great nemesis, finding the hidden treasure. But the treasure discovered is often not what was originally sought – a treasure much closer at hand – and the hero is transformed, returning then to the old, familiar world, but not as the same person and with gifts and wisdom for others.

Today, we as a church begin an adventure of sorts – a Fall journey of exploration and self-discovery and renewal. It is possible that you have never used the words *church* and *adventure* in the same sentence. It may seem odd to speak of our place in the world right now as an adventure, or of this church – or any other – being on the cusp of one!

COVID put a hiatus on our visions and plans, and we adjusted, but now in some ways things are looking better, more hopeful, and yet the mood in the Church isn'tt so much *Yay! Let's do everything that we haven't been able to do*, but rather, *What now? Why aren't people rushing back?* Churches everywhere are discovering that folks aren't stampeding to get back in and pick up where we left off.

And so in a way like the rich young man of long ago, we as the Church stand before that One who now looks intently at us. And as Christ himself peers deeply into our eyes and into our heart, we too are embraced in the divine compassion. “What must we do to inherit a successful future?” we ask. “What must we do to inherit new life?”

And His answer can only be this, that “You lack just one thing.” The Kingdom and New Life lie before us, but we’ll never find it until –

We leave it all behind.

We leave behind all doing that is motivated by fear.

We leave behind the obsession with a Promised Land of success.

We leave behind what we think the Promised Land is.

We leave behind the need to be successful as the world understands success.

We leave behind the need to appear perfect.

We leave behind that deep concern to save ourselves.

What *would* it look like to leave all that behind ... letting go of all we have known and depended upon ... all those habits of thought and action, all those assumptions about what matters?

Make no mistake: we *are* being called to an adventure – an adventure in which we leave behind what feels comfortable and normal, and take the risk of stepping into this strange, new post-COVID space in which are tested and tried and stretched. What will finally happen there is not known. In that space, our destiny is not in our own hands, as if it ever was.

Even so, let us take these steps together. Let us answer the call. An open road lies before us. On this journey, may we re-discover the refreshing power of God’s grace and love, and find that all things are possible.

To the Glory of God! Amen.