



## Sermons from First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor

One Lack This Lent

February 21, 2010

The Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 10: 17-22

When I was growing up here and the season of Lent would roll around, I'd usually give up doughnuts for the duration. I had figured out that I actually could do something to help others, rather than have this discipline be indistinguishable from a New Year's resolution, by putting the amount I'd spend on doughnuts for those forty days into my One Great Hour of Sharing box and bringing it to church on Palm Sunday. And since I love doughnuts, some years that coin box came back to church pretty heavy. It wasn't a big deal, but in a way, Lent came to mean to me 'that season when I give up doughnuts.'

But, of course, this holy season of preparation for Easter is much more than a fast from a food I shouldn't be eating anyway. Lent, which began this past Wednesday with two splendid services here in the sanctuary, is a time of deepened seriousness about what it means for us to be disciples of Jesus Christ. It is a gift of the church year in which we seek to be especially faithful in worship and prayer, in the study of scripture and spiritual reading, in self-denial and in service to others.

How we use Lent is, to some degree, dependent upon where we find ourselves in our life's journey, whether we are yet young or closer to life's end than its beginning. Biblical scholar Walter Wink said, 'The fundamental question for the first half of our pilgrimage is 'what is the meaning of my life?' The question for the second half is, 'with the time I have left, how can I make a difference?''

The man we meet in our lesson from Mark for this day is asking precisely that sort of question. We often call him 'the rich young ruler,' but according to Mark, we cannot know if he was young or a ruler; only that he was affluent, probably a landowner. He rushes up to Jesus and says, 'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus responds rather abruptly, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God." Translation: flattery will get you nowhere. And then Jesus tells him to follow the commandments, and reels off a few of those we call the Ten Commandments, with little attention to their order or completeness. And, oh yes, he throws in one that is not one of the Big Ten, saying, 'do not defraud.' Perhaps there is a bit of challenge there, as if Jesus is suggesting that this man's wealth might be ill-gotten.

The earnest man replies, protests even, that he's kept all the commandments since the day of his confirmation, back when he was a youth. And the situation begins to come a bit clearer. This is a good

man, a moral man, but there is within him the longing that is within all of us. Somehow we know that morality is not enough, that there is something more needed for a life that matters, something more than the security that possessions and reputation and influence, and even good behavior, can bring to our hearts.

In our time religion and morality are often confused. A person can be moral without being religious, but I don't think one can be religious person without being moral. I know a number of atheists whose moral standards are exemplary, who give generously of time and resources to help others, but who will have nothing to do with religion. On the other hand, true religion, that is, seeking to be in transformative relationship with the Divine should always lead to moral behavior. What is so troubling about the child abuse scandal in the Catholic Church and the financial and sexual exploits of some Protestant church leaders is that we expect religious professionals to be moral people. The man in our story has got the morality part down, but the religious part, the relationship with God part, still eludes him.

And he is mistaken at another point as well. He seems to think that if he is good enough, if he just finds the right action to do, the right commandment to follow, he will be rewarded with eternal life. He does not seem to know what we profess, that we are saved, not by our actions or deeds, but by the grace of God. And perhaps some of us struggle to remember that we are not saved by our good works, but for them.

Just then the story takes a wonderful and beautiful turn after the man protests his virtue. For then it says: Jesus, looking at him, loved him. This is the only place in Mark's account where it says Jesus loved someone. That moves me so deeply. Jesus looks at him with love, because he sees in this good and moral fellow the desire that most pleases Jesus, the desire to be deepened in his life with God. And out of love, out of his desire to do what is best for the man, Jesus tells him, 'you lack one thing.'

We pray for health, our own and others, for safety, for security, for peace, to be good and so much more, but Jesus is waiting for us to ask for a life that matters. Jesus looks at this man with love. He sees that his clothes are fine, that he is clean and neat, that he is educated and successful, and then seeing into his heart of hearts, Jesus sees this man's attachment to his success and the possessions it has brought him. Ah, says Jesus, now I see what you need. You need me, you need to be in relationship with others, to be in love with me, to let all this stuff go so you can help the poor. Let it go, live with me, open your hands and come on a journey to a place you cannot know but is exactly where you need to be. And then you'll have what you seek.

Notice that the man had asked what he could do to inherit eternal life. He wants something more for himself. That's really a bit selfish in spite of its good intention. As preacher John Killinger puts it:

“Real self-transcendence . . . doesn't come from paying so much attention to the self. It comes from giving up the self. You don't fulfill yourself by adding a new discipline to your life or achieving something you've never achieved before: by studying underwater photography or taking balloon rides over the Rockies . . . You do it by taking a right turn with the self, by forgetting yourself for a change and making a commitment to someone or something a lot bigger than you'll ever be by yourself.”

And that, my beloved in Christ, is what Lent is for. Sacrificing doughnuts or chocolate is just not what we're called to. We are called to engagement – serious, transformative engagement – with the One who looks on us with love and calls us to do the one thing that is most essential for us to move forward in our faith. Jesus tells each of us what we lack out of love for us, out of a desire to do what is best for us.

For the man in our story, his many possessions had come to possess him, and his way forward could only come by releasing his grip on all that stuff and the never ending quest for more. And what about us? What will Jesus in his love see in us that needs to be released this Lent? Maybe we are called to do just exactly as this man was, to say 'no' to the consumerist philosophy that dominates our world and give up our drivenness always to have more. Or maybe we need to sacrifice our sense of entitlement, our determination always to have things our way, our fear that in compromising others will think us weak. Maybe we are being called in love to release an old grudge or disappointment or resentment that's been held so long it defines us and divides us from another. Maybe we're being called by the One who loves us to embrace someone very different from us, to come out of the coziness of the familiar and same. Commentator Katherine Grieb is wise to say: Discipleship begins when the one thing that enslaves us is renounced and all its claims upon us are dissolved.

The story ends sadly, for the man cannot do as Jesus asks. He actually refuses a direct invitation and command from Jesus. His face falls, and so, I think, does that of Jesus. But Jesus loves him, and us, far too much to ask him to do something that is not necessary. He doesn't lower the ante and say to the man, 'okay, let's start with ten percent and see how it goes.' No, Jesus lets him go, hoping and praying that one day this man will realize the goodness of Jesus' invitation and accept it. With love, Jesus sees the so much more in us of which we are capable, and he calls it forth from us, for our own good and growth. And maybe this Lent, if we listen well and hear named what is the one thing we lack, we will find just what we need to do.

What might have happened if the man had made the other choice, if he had said "yes" to Jesus' loving instruction? What might happen to us? Let me propose an alternative ending to this story. I offer it in the form of an imaginary excerpt from this good man's diary, written some years after the encounter before us today:

"When Jesus said to me, 'You lack one thing. Go and sell all that you have, and give to the poor, and come follow me,' I was stunned. I thought he would give me one or two more commandments to follow, to insure my claim on eternal life, and I'd be off doing them to the utmost, just as I had always done in obeying the law. But no, he told me to sell everything and give the money to the poor! At first I thought, 'some kind of teacher this rabbi is, he can't be serious.' But looking into his bright eyes, and seeing what love was there, I knew he meant every word."

"So, I did it. No idea how I'd live in days to come, no idea of what the future might hold, but I sold it all, and gave the money to the poor. The looks on their faces! All those people I'd never seen before – beggars I'd passed by, widows I'd ignored, the clearly hungry trying to coax enough food from land I wouldn't have bought on the wildest speculation, sick folks who needed medical care, men just coming out of prison who wanted out of a life of crime as badly as I wanted God. I gave it all to them, and it was the looks of utter astonishment that I suppose fully and finally converted me. I didn't know

that the poor knew who I was. But it was evident they'd seen me clearly while I'd ignored them. And for them to see me, who thought himself so holy and good, giving them, well, life - they couldn't believe it."

"And there was Jesus, watching it all, nodding his head in smiling delight as I learned what he so clearly knew, that in helping all those people I was loving God and more, being loved by God, getting the very gift I thought I could earn by being a good, if lonely, person."

"Come, follow me, he said. And I did. I thought at the time, he must mean, go where I go. To Jericho and Bethany and Jerusalem. I thought it was a matter of geography. But he meant so much more. He meant follow me, when I go out beneath the stars at night to meditate deeply and pray long. Follow me, when I eat meals with all kinds of people, not just the ones with whom I'm comfortable. Follow me, when I talk to and touch the sick, the blind, the lame, the orphan, the weak - good grief - the dead. Follow me when I take time with every living being. Follow me when I give thanks for every gift God gives."

"Once I was good. Now I am God's. And I find myself living a life that will stretch into eternity, full of meaning and possibility. Is there suffering in this life? Of course. Watching Jesus die broke my heart. Is there hope in this life? Of course. In the midst of death and loss, always there is God, raising us to new life, out of our hurt and grief."

"I look at my old life now, good and moral as it was, and it seems like a dream. I remember one day at the house of Mary and Martha. Martha was busy and full of indignation that her sister Mary just sat and listened to Jesus. And Jesus said to her, Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things. Only one thing is needful. Mary has chosen it, and it shall not be taken from her. And I too, who was once anxious and troubled, mostly about my things, have found that which alone is needful. And thanks be to God, I have chosen it."

Let those who have ears, hear. Amen +