

“Invitation to the Dance”

As we say with increasing regularity around here, we do not take the Bible literally, but we do take it seriously.¹ Nevertheless, occasionally it’s almost refreshing to take something at face value. The last sentence of this morning’s lesson says, “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” So let’s start there, and work the whole lesson backwards. It might help to keep it handy so you can see where we’re going... or where we’ve been.

“The last will be first” is a saying we’ve seen before.² It’s a good thumbnail description of the Reign of God, a topsy-turvy reality in which women have full and equal status and the same marital rights as men, children are regarded as real people and what is prized above all is serving others. In this strange new realm the least, the ignored and the nobodies of the world hold the key to where God is and what God is up to. If you want to see where the Reign of God is breaking into our world, says Jesus, take a good look at what is happening with the lost and least... the losers. Don’t be so busy pushing your way to the front of the line or you’ll miss it entirely.

And in order to see things properly in this world stood on its head, you need to let go of whatever has been telling you who you are... and then you can find a new source of life that is eternal: not merely in the sense of being life after death but in the sense of being real life with depth. (Mark 8:35) Jesus is not peddling fire insurance.

I hope that all of that will be at least a little bit familiar to those who have heard the sermons over the past several weeks. We have puzzled over some of Jesus’ most challenging teachings; and what emerges is the picture of this very different world that is the Reign of God. To be a part of it, there is much about our lives that we have to change.

Peter wants reassurance. Good old Peter: he always blurts out what is on his mind. Life to him is a rolling Rorschach: one of those ink blot tests where you say the first thing that occurs to you. “Look,” he says to Jesus, “we have left everything and followed you.” And Jesus responds, “Truly I

¹ I believe it was Walter Brueggemann, noted biblical scholar and theologian of the UCC, who originated this saying.

² A very similar sentiment is expressed in Mark 9:35.

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.” When people step out of the lives they have known in order to follow Jesus, part of what they receive is the gift of community. And so they will have all that they need. “Those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel will save it.” They’re trading up to a life of deeper significance. This is the best life a person could imagine. It is the pearl of great price, the surpassingly wonderful gift. It is not joyless deprivation; it is an invitation to the dance, the real deal of real life.

How can this be? How is it that giving up the lives we have known will not leave us crippled with grief? It’s a God thing, because the real promise is that with surrender comes transformation. It’s not just that we won’t have our old life; we won’t *want* our old life. You can’t do this sort of thing to or for yourself. But with God all things are possible. On their own, people keep getting stuck in their old ways, they keep clinging to the things that have told them who they are, whatever gives them identity and security: possessions, place, job, appearance, abilities. It’s hard to let go, but it’s a God thing.

Exhibit A is wealth. Talk about something hard to let go of! That’s why becoming a part of the Realm of God is so hard for people with many possessions... it’s as though *they* are possessed... or at least preoccupied. It’s harder for rich folks to enter the Realm of God than it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle; harder than driving a Jaguar through a revolving door.³ Money is so difficult because of all the many ways it tells us who we are. It determines where we live, the people we regard as peers, the places we’re comfortable; whether, in the parlance of our times, we’re *somebody*. Every one of these things is an issue the Realm of God addresses, too... but differently. In a million ways we use money to separate ourselves from others. The Realm of God is all about seeing our oneness.

So trying to enter the Realm of God with money is like trying to swim the 100 yard freestyle with a safe strapped to your back. Again, this is difficult, and why the summons to follow Jesus is a summons to transformation. This is precisely what Jesus has been saying all along: “The

³ Apologies to Frederick Buechner, who updated the famous biblical image to driving a Cadillac through a revolving door. I’m trying to use the image without aiming it at anyone specific, and I don’t think I know anybody who drives a Jaguar.

Realm of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news.” Repent: change your ways, and trust in the vision of new life that is the Realm of God. Come and dance with me, everybody: young and old, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, slave and free. Taste and see how good God is! This is not life-denying at all. But it requires us to let go of the other stuff that has been our source of identity. Lose your life to find real and eternal life.

And so at last we come to the first, and the rich man who approaches Jesus. Let me tip my hand right away—forget the dramatic buildup—and tell you what I think is the key to this whole encounter: “Jesus, looking at him, loved him...” Mark, who wastes no words, wants us to know that what Jesus says to this man is motivated by love. He doesn’t turn to the disciples and say, “Watch me nail this guy!” Rather, in love Jesus speaks a difficult truth that has the power to release this man from his captivity to the stuff that owns him.

Jesus says, “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.” Can you imagine? Only one thing is holding you back! Turn it loose and you can have your heart’s desire!

The encounter hadn’t begun with much promise. The elegantly attired, carefully groomed, socially refined man flatters his way up to Jesus, who is not buying. “Good teacher,” the rich man begins, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Inherit eternal life” is an interesting expression, almost as though the man is asking Jesus, “How do I become a part of your family?”

Evidently Jesus isn’t sure the man is serious. He bristles at the flattery: “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” This isn’t just about hanging out with me. It’s about entrusting your life to God: that’s what we’re about here. I don’t think your problem is knowledge. You know the commandments, don’t you? And the man replies in words I find filled with pathos, “Teacher, I have kept all these things since my youth.” Been there, done that, got the merit badge: but I still feel so empty.

Do you see the love in Jesus’ response? Your money is what keeps you living in a “me-o-centric” universe! It distorts your relationships, warps your view of yourself and others and keeps you at a distance from the real life you crave. Let it go. Come with us. You will never regret it.

But the rich man is shocked. And he goes away grieving. Is that the end of the story? Or is this another of Mark’s unfinished stories like the

empty tomb story, that almost demands that we supply a different ending? In any event, notice what the rich man gains by walking away: grief.

We know this man; or at least we know his question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” It’s not, “How do I get to heaven after I die?” It’s more like, “How do I fill this empty space within myself?” I can’t fill it with things. I can’t fill it by keeping rules. What do I do? In some senses, this is the question of our time. In our privileged society the question is only occasionally, “How can I make a living?” More commonly it’s “How can I really live?”

Last week Frank Thomas, our two Associate Ministers and I, along with about a dozen others, met with a man named Mark Allan Powell, who has written a wonderful book, entitled *Giving to God: The Bible’s Good News About Living a Generous Life*.⁴ Powell was talking about the spiritual emptiness that so many people seem to feel and how bookstores are filled to overflowing with self-help books on ways to make life more deeply spiritual. He said that recently he saw a woman heading to the cash register with a pile of these books and he wanted to say to her, “Don’t do this! Put down the books and just do four things: worship regularly, read the Bible with others, pray daily, and learn to give generously. Try that for six months, and if your life isn’t transformed, all the books will still be there!”

That is shocking in its directness, but also refreshingly clear. Powell also says rather bluntly, “I’ve never known an unhappy tither.” Since the word “tither” is not in my Microsoft Word dictionary (it always shows up with a squiggly red underlining) let me define it. A tither is someone who gives ten percent of his or her income to God’s work. We can split hairs about net or gross, giving to church or other things, but the essentials are 10% and God. Powell says he’s never known an unhappy tither; neither have I.

Now, either people become happy and *then* one day they start to tithe; or there’s something about giving at a significant level that contributes to human happiness. Obviously I think it’s the latter. We don’t get smart and then start to read books. We don’t have “extra” money and then start to save. We don’t run a marathon and then become fit.

In each of these things we first make a modest beginning. We start slowly with *Goodnight Moon* and work our way up to Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. We set aside a modest amount of money for savings and

⁴ Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006.

discover how surprisingly easy it is to live without it. We move around a little bit, walk and then run and gradually become fit enough to run a marathon.

Similarly, we begin to give as we can and gradually work toward the point where giving becomes a joy. At first it's kind of a grudging obligation and we almost resent being invited to do it—even to things we believe in. Then it becomes a source of satisfaction and a feeling of participation in something that matters. Then it becomes an opportunity to show our love for God. And then it becomes a joyous connection... one step at a time. It is a summons to a way of life that the world really does not understand.

Giving for control? Sure, we know all about that. Giving for recognition? We know what that is. But giving for the joy of it? That's more unusual.

Giving is just one dimension of the life of discipleship to which we're called. But it's where Jesus starts with the man who is rich in things and poor in soul. If the rich man really wants to learn about the Realm of God, he needs to discover life at the back of the line.

It's an offer he's free to refuse. But it's a deal, Jesus knows, that he would never regret. For now he goes away grieving. I imagine him getting back into his limo, going back to one of his villas, back to his unhappy spouse and his sycophantic friends; as far away from Jesus as he can get. Poor, poor rich man. Will he ever learn to dance?

Amen

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