

Threading the Needle

Mark 10:17-31

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Northminster Presbyterian Church

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Every time I hear Jesus speak like this, I'm forced to acknowledge that I just don't measure up. Maybe you too? After all, this isn't the only time Jesus is recorded as calling for us to give up everything and follow him. And though I like to think that if by some crisis everything was stripped away, I'd still be faithful – that the things – the furniture, the car, the pension, the choices, the privilege – are not really that important to me. But then I think to myself, well if they aren't that important, why do you still have them? Aren't you just like that sad young man?

It's daunting isn't it?...the idea that the Baptismal identity we have just celebrated...the journey of the life of faith... means following someone who tells this earnest, decent guy, who has tried his darnedest to follow the Ten Commandments...and Jesus says...it's not enough, sell everything too.

But then another part of me says...oh, no, Michael, calm down...you've read your commentaries...all of those times the church has interpreted this to mean something other than it says.

Some of our very first great theologians went out of their way to soften the blow of what Jesus seems to be saying. Clement of Alexandria, an early church father, said that a rich person can be saved "if one is able in the midst of wealth to turn from its power...and seek God alone."

Likewise John Chrysostom in the 4th and 5th century argued: "There is an art in using wealth, and let the rich person 'learn then to use his wealth aright, and to pity the poor.'" Medieval writers went so far as to invent, out of whole cloth, a fictitious door in the wall to Jerusalem called "the Needle" that required camels to have their wealth unpacked from their humps before they could fit through the doorway to argue that this was not about wealth, per se, but "one's attitude toward it."

Well, that would be awesome and would help me make the rather obvious and almost rude suggestion that while we're learning how to have a better attitude about our money, what better way could there be to show that than well, you know...the pledge card is sitting right there on your desk at home...But that's not only a bad justification for stewardship..."give more so you can get into the kingdom of heaven"...it isn't what Jesus said. He told that sad young man, "sell everything you have...."

Speaking of sad young men...did you happen to catch that story about Daryl Watson a few years ago on This American Life? Daryl was a young playwright in New York, and in 2009 he gave away everything he owned. Then he changed his name to "Peace Pilgrim" and set out to walk from Delaware to California. Seriously.

He'd been a devout Christian as a teenager, but had drifted. He wanted to find out, in his own words, what his mission statement for life should be. He wanted an answer from God. He'd tried it all...fasting and praying, studying under a shaman, traveling to the Holy Land. But nothing gave him what he needed. That's when he came across the story of a woman, Mildred Morgan, from the 1950s, who changed HER name to "Peace Pilgrim" and walked across the country for 28 years. She followed Jesus' directives literally, relying on the kindness and generosity of strangers. Daryl wanted this. He sold everything and put the cash in an envelope that he planned to give to charity. He wiped his computer clean and left it along with his cell phone in the hotel with a note for the cleaning staff to take it.

I think one of the reasons the story of the rich man is so disturbing to so many of us is that he really wants to do what is right. He wants to be faithful to God. He follows the commandments, does what he is supposed to do. If anyone is faithful, then it's this guy. He's a lot like many of the people we've met in the church over the years. People who want to do what is right. People who sincerely want to be faithful.

But that's not enough...not according to Jesus... not for this man. He's got to give it all away.

Back in Delaware, Daryl tried to give away his money, roughly \$2000. He walked past a church and talked with a pastor. He tried to give him the

money but the pastor thought he had stolen it and when Daryl said that he wasn't quite sure about the worshipping Jesus thing anymore, the pastor sent him away...The church wouldn't take his money and practically threw him out. I hope his stewardship committee never heard that story.

Daryl went on his way, wrote "for charity" on the envelope and dropped it in the first mailbox he saw. He slept on the steps of the Catholic Church that first night. It was cold and he had no sleeping bag.

Sometimes I wonder what good giving everything away would actually do for anybody. Would it help the poor or just make us feel more faithful? My friend Andrew Foster Connors, the pastor at Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian in Baltimore, has always been one of those people whose commitment to solidarity with the poor and oppressed inspires me. He tells a story of a time he was on a journey not too dissimilar to Daryl's. Back in college days he left the UNC campus and began visiting several small, poor communities in the eastern part of NC to do community organizing. He says he wanted to do what was right, to give his life for justice. One night, when he was sleeping on the floor of a small African-American church in tiny Tillery NC, one of the leaders of the community asked him what he thought he was doing. "This is how I want to spend my life," he said. "You know, in the struggle." The leader looked at Andrew, thoroughly unconvinced. "You want to help? Then go back home and tell your people to stop oppressing mine."

Andrew learned giving up his status wasn't what was needed...giving up the idea of being their deliverer was...Sometimes Christ calls us to let go of not our wealth, but the idea that we are the answer to any of the world's important questions.

On his second day, young Daryl made it to a college town where a student noticed him getting water in a fast food place. After learning about his mission the college student took off his red sweatshirt and gave it to him, saying, "You're going to need this more than me." He was right. Daryl was totally unprepared for this trip. He had done no trekking, almost no hiking - ever. He didn't have warm clothes. He had no food. By day three, he realized he was in trouble. He tried to keep his mind on God. But the

chill was much colder than he imagined, and no one had offered him shelter and he was getting terrified. At two in the morning after a police officer refused to let him get warm in his squad car, Daryl passed a billboard that said, "It's okay to make mistakes, as long as they're new ones." He couldn't walk anymore and he knew it. So he found a hotel with a sympathetic manager and he called home and begged his mother for help. That night, in the room that she rented for him, he realized that the urgency behind the questions that had first driven him to give up everything had vanished. The questions were important, but having the answers to those questions now seemed secondary to, well, living.¹

I am confident that Jesus calls us to follow him, it's just that I'm not always sure where. I know that money in our culture is an idol that we've got to let go of if we really want to follow him, but I'm also pretty sure it's not a good idea for most of us to give it all away and walk across the country. Jesus isn't a self-help guru. He isn't calling us to self-improvement. He's not offering his life so that we can find meaning in ours. In his life...his death....his resurrection...he is announcing that the kingdom of God has come near, where nothing we can do makes us good enough, but God's love manifest in Christ makes all welcome anyway. And he calls us to follow him...equipping us to love the unlovable, to give voice to powerless, to welcome the children, to confront oppression and greed when it makes tycoons of some and paupers of others...not because those things make us valuable or important...but because they need doing.

Yes, following Jesus necessarily means leaving a lot behind. But leaving is only half of the call. Daryl forgot that the original Peace Pilgrim wasn't seeking the meaning of life...she was making her life meaningful by walking and talking and living her life to proclaim a message of peace.

Jesus doesn't just call us to let go of those things to which we are clinging to define ourselves....Jesus is calling us TOWARD God and toward the world that God is already ahead of us creating. Calling us toward a

¹ Elna Baker interviewed Daryl Watson, <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/483/self-improvement-kick?act=1>.

world where families are marked not by the hierarchies of the world, but by the loving kindness and open hospitality of Jesus' chosen family of disciples. Calling us toward a world where cities and states and nations and yes, even churches, measure their success in how well the least vulnerable in our world are faring. Calling us toward a world where we don't worry about whether we are good enough, because we know that nothing we can do can earn God's gracing love, but instead in grateful response to that love we seek to do good more than BE good. Calling us toward a world where things like money and time and the various skills and talents we have are tools...tools to be used for healing, and loving, and making people and communities whole. And that's what threading the needle is...recognizing that by our own actions... no matter how much we have or how much we give away... we don't get there on our own.

My grandmother taught me that if you want to thread a needle, you have to start by wetting the end of the thread...and that starts for us...right there. (Indicating the font).

And then, our gracious Christ, by his living grace, stitches us into the fabric of the great tapestry that is the Kingdom of God. Thanks be to God.