

“Seeking to Live God’s Love”
 Acton Congregational Church (UCC)
 03 October 2021
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Texts: 2 Corinthians 5:14-20
 Mark 10:17-26

“They were greatly astounded and said to one another: ‘Then who can be saved?’”
 – Mark 10:26

Prayer
God of mercy,
Revealed in Jesus Christ,
Look upon us with love.
Open our minds to your Word
That hearing we might believe
And believing trust you and follow in the Way of our “cross-dead-but-risen-Lord.”
Hear our prayer, O God. Amen.

“Then who can be saved?”

The disciples’ question in today’s Gospel reading has enthralled, tantalized, bewildered, and challenged the Church for over two millennia. The version of the Bible from which I read – the New Revised Standard Version best known by its acronym NRSV – does not fully capture the emotions that came over Jesus’ closest followers when they asked the question that, we might say, is at the heart of our religious tradition. In the original Greek text, the disciples were not just “***greatly astounded***,” the friends of Jesus were stricken with panic. They were shocked and terrified! They could not believe what they had just seen and heard. Jesus’ encounter with the rich man whom Matthew describes as being “***young***”¹ and Luke depicts as a “***ruler***,”² in other words, as a man of prestige and authority, sent shivers down the disciples’ spines. Their theology, cultural assumptions and entire world were turned upside down as soon as the rich young ruler walked away from Jesus, heartbroken and grieving, still deeply faithful to his religion but fearful of doing the one thing that would give him the fuller life he yearned for.

Jesus loved this young man of wealth and privilege from the moment he sensed the spiritual restlessness in the man’s soul. Jesus loved the man’s courage to run up to him – a penniless, itinerant rabbi from Galilee – to reveal with daring honesty what was in his heart. Jesus loved this young man because, though a ruler, he did not hesitate to land on his knees before him – a homeless preacher on his way to the cross – to ask one of the most important religious questions ever asked by anyone else in the Gospels, “***Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?***”

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It is not hard to see why Jesus' heart warmed instantly to this intense, sincere and unusually wise young man who longed to know how he could be more intentional about living in God's Presence. No one else had ever called him a "**good teacher**" before and, even though Jesus rejected that unique compliment right away, after all, Jesus knew that his mission was to reconcile humankind to God and urge human beings to live not just for ourselves but for God and point people toward God's love, I think Jesus could tell that the words on the man's lips were not just meaningless flattery or empty praise. Jesus was a good judge of people's intentions. He could see in the upturned face of the man at his feet that this young man of high social rank admired him and believed in the goodness of Jesus' teachings and ministry. And what is not to love about a young adult that is not satisfied with a life of material comfort, affluence, wealth and power but who thirsts for a life of purpose, a life of faith that has significance not only in this lifetime but for all eternity.

Being a faithful Jew who knew the Torah intimately, Jesus turned to the Ten Commandments and offered them to this man with a burning desire to live well not as strict rules about what not to do, but as guidelines that draw people closer to God and to one another and, therefore, to eternal life. "***If you want to live honorably. If you want to have your life shaped into a life that reflects the eternal essence of God's love. If you want to live with your heart open to God's eternal goodness,***" Jesus said to the man in front of him, "***Do not murder; do not commit adultery; do not steal; do not bear false witness; do not defraud; honor your father and mother.***"

In case you have not noticed, only the 5 most socially oriented commandments appear in Jesus' list. He assumed that the young man kept the Sabbath, worshipped no other gods or idols, and never misused God's name. Jesus focused on the statutes that say how we are supposed to treat other people and live in community. If the rich young ruler was serious about becoming the kind of person who lives a meaningful life closer to God, he would have to be aware of the social dimension of his faith and longing. And to drive his point home, Jesus even added an extra commandment that does not appear in the original Decalogue: "***you shall not defraud.***" The intent here was clear, Jesus was inviting the wealthy young man to consider how in a region where the vast majority of people were poor and landless his own family could have amassed such huge fortune and become large landowners. Rather than allowing the young man to keep justifying his wealth and status as privilege, Jesus challenged him to acknowledge that his lifestyle was only possible because of the exploitation of daily workers and tenant farmers. To become a new person shaped by faith and transformed by God's word and to live eternally, Jesus was saying to this amazing young man, he would have to change the priorities in his life and re-imagine how his life would touch other lives in the world.

When I was in Southern Brazil, I attended a Lutheran Church with my mother and the pastor said something in her sermon that stuck with me. She said that, as Christians, we have to be an integral part of the life of our communities outside the church. We have to do what we can to make the world fairer, kinder, more peaceful and more loving. We must be the kind of people who make the reality of God's love tangible,

which means that our lives should be a blessing to other people and our faith should have a measurable impact on the quality of life in our society.³

The man in Mark's Gospel was not shy about his commitment to the Torah and his devotion to God. He may be the only person in the Gospels to tell Jesus that he kept all the commandments since childhood, even the one about not defrauding. Ched Myers, a Christian social justice activist and theologian, noted in his commentary on this passage that the rich young ruler put himself in rather exalted company since the Talmud states that only Abraham, Aaron and Moses achieved the exceptional spiritual feat of keeping the whole law.⁴ In other words, the man told Jesus that he was blameless; that in his entire life he had never done any harm to anyone. Up to that very moment, the rich man told Jesus that he had been a devout man, a respectable man, a man of faith and a man who believed that his wealth was a sign of God's favor.

It was at this point that Jesus, still loving this young man who thought so highly of himself, his piety and his possessions, realized that the man who ran up to him full of hope and longing for life eternal was not really searching for answers but for affirmation. In his own eyes, the wealthy man believed that he had already done all the hard work to earn life eternal. All he really hoped to get from Jesus, the Good Teacher he admired so much, was religious validation so that the restlessness in his soul that insisted on reminding him that something might still be missing would go away.

Jesus, of course, did the exact opposite. Because he loved the man's honesty, his religious commitment, his passion for the Torah, and his question, Jesus took a big risk. He did something he knew might be difficult for this young man to hear and could even break this man's heart, but he was not going to withhold the blow of truth. ***"You lack one thing,"*** Jesus said to the man who was caught totally off guard, ***"go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."***

Greg Garrett, author of the book *"The Other Jesus,"* which, by the way, some of us are going to discuss next Wednesday evening as part of the year-long adult education class that is exploring the Christological question: *"Who is Jesus?"*, said in his book that faith is a journey rather than an arrival; something we keep doing instead of something we have accomplished.⁵

The rich young ruler hoped that the Good Teacher would reassure him that he had arrived, finished, and accomplished what was needed to have life eternal, but Jesus told him that he still had a lot more to do. Instead of getting a pat on the back and hearing *"well done!"*, this man was told that transformation is hard and life abundant does not come by without a price. As Tripp Fuller, a youngish, charismatic, UCC minister and theologian, would say in his own irreverent style, Jesus invited the rich young ruler to get high with him.⁶ To give his life entirely to the ministry of reconciliation. The ongoing work of bringing people together before God. The ministry of grace that opens our hearts to Jesus' invitation to follow him so he can tell us time and over again

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that to live well and fully we have to risk giving our whole lives away to something bigger than ourselves, something good: to God and to our neighbors. Jesus offered the rich man a chance to become a new creation, a new human being, a person of faith who knows deep inside that following Jesus requires more than beliefs, knowledge of Scriptures, theological orthodoxy, perfect church attendance or a personal confession that Jesus is Lord and Savior. Following Jesus demands that we keep trying to live into our hope for life abundant. To be on the Way with Jesus means to seek to live God's love out in the world each day because following Christ is something we keep doing. It's only the beginning rather than the finish line.

Jesus' invitation was too much for the rich young man. There was so much promise in that moment when he ran up and knelt before Jesus, but the truth is that the man who was searching for life eternal, as it turned out, did not want it hard enough to pay the price. He turned around, deflated, disappointed, upset, and downhearted. He walked away from Jesus' love. He turned down the offer to have treasure in heaven. The rich man who seemed to be good at everything was not good at living for others or giving his money to the poor. Giving up his wealth was where he drew the line. So he left and was never seen again. As Barbara Brown Taylor put it, the man “***decided to go back to his old well-padded life instead of choosing the new stripped-down life Jesus offered him.***”⁷

Yes! The disciples were shocked! If that super religious rich young ruler who was absolutely perfect on paper and had everything going for him could not be saved, meaning, have a fuller life in God's Kingdom, “***Then who can be saved?***”

It is fair to say that every generation of Christians have approached this passage in the Gospel of Mark with the same kind of discomfort, trepidation, shock and even dread the first disciples expressed. How does a church filled with very comfortable people, who, by the world's standards, are among the wealthiest individuals on the planet hear those searing words of Jesus: “***How hard it will be for those who have wealth 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?***” How do two pastors who make more money than all the world's working poor listen to Jesus' challenge about questioning what it takes for us to be rich among the poor? This is not an easy passage to hear on a Sunday morning. Still, I am grateful that we can hear it and rather than walking away from the Gospel because it is difficult and challenging, you and I have chosen to keep trying to follow Jesus because we know we are on a journey; because we want to keep trying to give ourselves away to the ministry of reconciliation; because we want our lives to matter, to be purposeful, to have something eternal about them; because like the apostle Paul, we too believe that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.⁸

A little while ago, I mentioned Greg Garrett's book “*The Other Jesus*,” in the second chapter, Garrett shares a fascinating anecdote about his first encounter with one of his heroes, the writer Maya Angelou whom he described as “***Oprah on***

multivitamins.⁹ Ms. Angelou was invited to speak to one of the classes in the English Department at Baylor University where Garrett teaches. At the time, Garrett confessed in his book, he would have described himself as a “*cultural Christian*” at best, but in truth he did not have a very positive view of Christians or the Church. After Ms. Angelou finished her lecture, Garrett went up to thank her for her writing, books and everything she was able to accomplish. He remembers that Ms. Angelou was sitting at the desk still holding his hand when he told her in a condescending tone, “***And to think... you’re a Christian.***”¹⁰ What happened next, Greg Garrett says changed the course of his life. Maya Angelou looked up at him. A gentle smile broke across her face, and she shook her head perhaps at his question or at him or both. “***Oh, honey,” she said in that deep rich resonant voice, “I am not a Christian. I am trying to be a Christian.***”¹¹

Garrett claims that on that moment Maya Angelou introduced him to a new way of believing in God. She showed him that faith in God is a journey that grows out of a decision, rather than a single decision isolated in time.¹²

I wonder what would have happened if the rich young ruler had told Jesus that he was not quite ready yet to sell all his possessions and give everything to the poor, but that he was not going to walk away either; that somehow, he would stick around and try, one step at a time, to follow Jesus, to join him on the journey of reconciliation.

“Oh, honey... I am not a Christian. I am trying to be a Christian.”¹³

Several months ago, the Board of Deacons came up with a single short sentence to convey to the world what we believe, treasure, value, and strive for as a congregation. Those of you who are longtime members probably noticed already that this new motto, if you will, has quietly replaced the wordy Mission Statement that used to be on the cover of our Sunday bulletin. Now, right below our church’s name on the bulletin cover, you see that simple and powerful statement of our ideals, hopes, and faith: Seeking to live God’s love.

It took the deacons a couple of months and a few meetings to finally agree on this sentence, but when the Spirit moved among us and we were all of the same mind and heart, what emerged is this simple and yet bold choice to define our congregation and everything we do together as an ongoing journey. We are seeking to live God’s love side by side. We are seeking to live God’s love in our church by refusing to quit when things get tough. We are seeking to live God’s love instead of walking away from Jesus. We are all seeking to live God’s love even though we are rich in the eyes of the world and we do have to ask ourselves how we became so wealthy among the poor of the Earth. We are seeking to live God’s love by remaining faithful to the ministry of reconciliation Christ entrusted to the Church. Friends, we are all trying to be Christians here by following Jesus, by listening to his words even when they make us uncomfortable, by living not for ourselves but for others, by going with our youth group and Confirmation Class to Worcester to meet people they would never see face-to-face if we were not doing our best to live in God’s Kingdom.

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I am grateful that you have not turned your back on Christ, but are here seeking to live God's love. Instead of panicking like the first disciples did, let us keep on trying to be Christians. The answer to the disciples' question "***who can be saved?***" is simple: those who do not look back. Anyone who keeps trying and does not give up on Jesus. All of us who want to do the hard work of reconciliation in the world and are seeking to live God's love.

So, honeys, come to the Lord's Table on this World Communion Sunday. Be thankful that we come with millions of people all over the world who are trying to be Christians. And as we gather to eat and drink at the Lord's Table may the words of the poet Wendell Berry warm our hearts with gratitude for our church and for all who are seeking to live God's love in the Church today:

***"...come,
Let us meet here together,
Members one of another,
Here in our holy room...
Here in the daylit sky,
Rejoicing mind and eye,
Rejoining known and knower...
One household, high and low,
And all the earth shall sing."***¹⁴

Amen.

¹ Matthew 19:20.

² Luke 18:18.

³ I am paraphrasing what I remember of Rev. Rodiany Pommerening's sermon.

⁴ Ched Myers in Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus, p. 273.

⁵ Greg Garrett in The Other Jesus: Rejecting a Religion of Fear for the Love of God, p. 55 [Kindle Edition].

⁶ I borrowed the language and idea from Tripp Fuller's book Homebrewed Christianity Guide to Jesus: Lord, Liar, Lunatic or... Awesome?, p. 111 [Kindle Edition].

⁷ Barbara Brown Taylor in Rich in Love, published in Always a Guest, p. 94.

⁸ Philippians 4:13.

⁹ Greg Garret in The Other Jesus: Rejecting a Religion of Fear for the Love of God, p. 11 [Kindle Edition].

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Wendell Berry in A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997, p. 52.