

## Sunday, October 10, 2021

Grace and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.  
Amen

As we continue to read from Mark's gospel, we find the followers of Jesus are on a roll – and it's not a good roll. Sandwiched between two forecasts of Jesus' death and resurrection in chapters 9 and 10 are an interesting series of attempts to determine who is greatest in this kingdom Jesus brings, to stop someone who is not part of their group from casting out demons, and, of course, to keep kids away from Jesus. Even Pharisees are caught up in this narrowing spiral and try to trap Jesus into declaring who is right and who is wrong in the hotly debated topic of divorce as we saw last Sunday.

And, perhaps not surprisingly, we find in every instance Jesus responds by reframing the question and then calling his followers to a wider understanding. You see, our sinful tendency, as we seek to address our aloneness all by ourselves, we turn in on ourselves and turn against others. And in that process, we like our forebears in faith, create rules and rulings that accumulate like barnacles on a ship on our God-given need for community. These barnacles solidify into institutionalized prevention of individuals and whole populations from full and dignified participation in human and Christian communities. Jesus lived, died, and was raised from the dead to pry off the barnacles, sweep away the build up, and reveal the deep intent and desire of God who insists from the very beginning and for all time that it is not good for human beings to be alone.

So, we find Jesus telling his disputing disciples, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." And about the outsider casting out demons Jesus says, "Do not stop him." As he holds a small child close to him Jesus says yet again, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them."

It seems evident that every time we try to narrow the way or the welcome to something less than the width of Jesus' own outstretched arms, Jesus stretches our hearts wider to encompass those who have been dehumanized, excluded and condemned – those who have been left alone because of sin – both theirs and ours. So perhaps more than anything else, today's gospel is simply an invitation to bring our broken, sinful selves – those selves that often mess up in search for community – to kneel side by side with others at the table of broken-bodied, poured-out love. It is those that we encounter once again. We continue to encounter the mystery of God's love, forgiveness and mercy that are as wide as the outstretched arms of the risen Jesus.

And yet, even as we believe all that to be true, we cannot help but wonder how many of us picture Jesus as having outstretched, inviting arms as we read our gospel text today.

Perhaps many of us see nearly the opposite, at least at first glance. Many folks picture Jesus without arms outstretched – with one arm outstretched and a judgmental finger pointed at the one we identify as the "rich man."

A moment ago, I said that Jesus often reframes questions and then goes on to teach his audience a valuable lesson. Today's gospel text is an excellent example.

I believe that Jesus wants his disciples and you and me to be shocked by the dialog that takes place in these verses. And, at least initially, it appears shocking – as we wonder what Jesus is really up to. Is he serious? Or, is he making a point that escapes us as we first encounter this text?

As we initially hear the man's response to Jesus, we wonder about him. Is he perfect, or at least – is he a better person than most folks including us? Who among us is perfect or near perfect at keeping the Commandments God gave so long ago?

And as we wonder about this man and what his life might have been like we are brought up short as Jesus says that the man must go and sell all that he has and give the money to the poor. And if and when he does just that – he will have treasure stored in heaven.

And we're caught between appreciating the heavenly reward and understanding that to receive it he must sell all that he had and give the proceeds to the poor. How do we reconcile all of this?

A point that is easy to overlook in this entire dialog between Jesus, the rich man and the disciples has to do with life itself. That is, life alone vs. life in community. If you live a solitary life, having little to do with any others you indeed may be better able to keep all of the Commandments.

However, we are all aware that as you live life fully engaged in community: family, work, groups of all sorts, life becomes less sterile and much, much messier. Interactions with folks test us in many ways. It tests everything about us. Just look at the Commandments and it is easy to see that living among others gives us unlimited opportunities to break each and every one if we are so disposed.

Living a solitary life, life with limited interaction with others, is apparently not how Jesus would have us live.

Living a solitary life, thinking of self nearly exclusively, is not how Jesus would have us live.

We are to be in relationships of all sorts. Therefore, as Jesus puts others first – so too, we are to follow his example.

Sell all you have and give the proceeds to the poor. Is that to be taken literally? Well, apparently, the rich man thought so as he went away grieving.

He was unable to grasp the concept of living in community and sharing good fortune with those less fortunate.

The last thing we need, in one sense, is more rich people made penniless because they gave all their money to good causes. That certainly doesn't make sense.

And it misses the point that eternal life is not something that we accomplish by working through a preset prescribed list of deeds that we check off when completed. Eternal life is pure gift given to us by the death and resurrection of Jesus who wished for his disciples and all who follow him to see that when we follow him – follow his teachings – we will be rewarded. We are never alone. We are given all that we need to live with others, in community, as Jesus would have us do.

We will be able to support one another, giving to those who have needs we can meet; we will be able to comfort those who are hurting and those who mourn; we will be able to forgive as we are forgiven; we will be able to offer peace and grace, care and concern, and love to all as we receive the same from others in the communities in which we find ourselves.

You see, when we live under the teachings, the direction of Jesus, we live life on Jesus' terms – always in community, always with an eye, ear and heart for those who have specific needs.

And living this life seems to automatically mean that we will not be perfect at it – at least not all the time. We will break Commandments, we will mess us (me-with regularity), and as we do, we know that we are forgiven and have the opportunity to move forward striving to live a more Christ-like life.

Thanks be to God. Amen