With Harassments

A Meditation on Mark 10: 17 – 34

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church October 10, 2021

Jesus heals someone whose legs once were paralyzed and we say, “Amen!” Healing is fabulous; we like healing!

Jesus hears the growling of hungry stomachs, responds with compassion and bread, and we say, “Amen! The hungry should be fed!” “Feed them, Jesus!”

Jesus hears that the disciples have prevented children from getting near him; and in defiance, he takes a child in his arms, says, “Be like this little one!” and we say, “Oops, yes, of course! We love children, *too!* Amen!”

But our voices grow softer as Jesus, in contradiction to the religious law, prevents a woman from being stoned. Polite applause. “Amen! *Forgiveness is awesome.* Does everyone deserve forgiveness? I know ***I*** do!”

Jesus cares for the elderly, the grieving, the lonely, the mentally ill, the ostracized, and we say, “Amen, amen, amen!” We say, “Preach?”

Jesus hangs out with unwashed homeless beggars, drunkards, sex workers and then he has to ask, “Can I get an “Amen?”

And then…and then… Jesus says, “time to empty out your pockets, your closets, your attics,” and we say, “What?? We say, “Did someone say something?” We say, “Didn’t quite catch that here on the back row. What was that, again?” And though we might not say it aloud, we are thinking and mumbling, “but Jesus, you don’t know what it is like…”

“You, who hold the world in the palm of your hand, you don’t know what it is like.”

Jesus doesn’t respond; he looks on us with love. He knows that unless we have walked this earth without a coin in our pockets, we don’t know what it is like to walk in God’s sandals. Those who have known want will speak of vulnerability, fear, hopelessness, temptation, and, very likely, a question about the existence of God. Jesus knows this well.

A man, a faithful, God-loving man, approaches Jesus. He knows the commandments. He has – according to him – followed them. We can’t give him a free pass on this just because he is rich. Being wealthy doesn’t protect you from temptation. Being comfortable is no insurance policy against sinning, although it may make believing in God a little less complicated? Let us take this man at his word: he has worked to live in God’s ways. What we can infer from his willingness to track down a penniless rabbi, is that something is missing in his life. The wealth, the comfort, the freedom from fear of hunger and homelessness: these are not enough.

Picture him in his beautiful clothes, pursuing Jesus, and then kneeling in the dirt before him. He takes a position of humility before our scruffy Jesus. What an odd scene this must have been. This man has come looking for a secret. He knows that wealth will not buy him longevity, much less eternal life. He understands that just being good isn’t enough. Was it just a show? Did he think Jesus would praise him for all that he has done? Did he hope Jesus would say, “with your righteous living you have obtained eternal life?” Did he think this would be his moment to shine? Was he seeking praise, or was he truly curious about eternal life? Being fortunate to live in such abundance on this earth, it is somewhat surprising that he has such concern about life beyond. Yet this man is searching, and he has come to the right place.

Jesus, this man who has nothing does not look on the man who has everything with eyes of judgement. Jesus, we read in verse 21, “looked at him carefully and loved him.” This may be the most critical verse in this entire story. Are their vital things for us to learn from this text about wealth and compassion and community? Absolutely! But we must not rush past *this* moment. Time and time again, when Jesus has the opportunity to declare judgement, when he has the right to make a judgement, he expresses mercy instead. Like any good teacher, he is hard on his students, his disciples, but when encountering someone in the community, he offers mercy over judgement.

Wherever you are on the economic spectrum: a struggling student, a retiree who has planned carefully for this stage of life, a parent who wonders how you will get your child through college; whether you are on disability and trying to make ends meet or are finally breathing a bit easier because you have a plan for paying off your debts - wherever you are on that spectrum, the temptation to judge others is always before you.

It is easy to look down on those who have less, and easy to resent those who have more. Jesus looked at this man kneeling before him and did not judge. He “looked carefully at him and loved him.” “It is more than admiration or respect or sentimentality,” writes Walter Brueggemann. “It is the gut wrenching concern one has for a loved one about to take his own life. All that is important in a moment like that is to take the gun out of his hands and help him discover a reason to live.” (p. 547, Texts for Preaching.) I wonder if that is something we are able to do? When someone stands before us with a question of existence, do we hear them? Or does our own “junk” get in the way?

Now, Jesus, being Jesus is able to do what we are not. He looks upon this pereson’s heart. What he sees might possibly be revealed in what he says next…Jesus recites *some* of the commandments. Look back at verse 19: You know the commandments, Jesus says: *Don’t commit murder. Don’t commit adultery. Don’t steal. Don’t give false testimony*. Don’t cheat. *Honor your father and mother.”*(CEB)

“Don’t cheat” isn’t actually on the top 10 list. Was this some kind of test or game? Can you find the commandment that doesn’t belong? Or was Jesus saying something that *this* person specifically needed to hear? Without accusing, was he offering a road map for the eternal life on ramp?

Was this man’s wealth somehow tied to cheating others? Cheating falls into the lying category, so it doesn’t really need its own commandment, but Jesus makes it a commandment just for him.

Scripture is clear about our responsibility for those who are in need. Being wealthy comes with its own challenges, its own weight. Cheating to acquire wealth is in a different category entirely. Jesus tells this man to sell his belongings, give the money away and join him in his ministry. Jesus doesn’t condemn people for having money – he was dependent upon those who could feed him, could shelter him. But Jesus spoke loudly against abuse, and maybe that’s what this seeker needed to hear.

We don’t know if what Jesus said made any difference. He walked away without any promise of returning. He didn’t walk away with a lighter step, having been encouraged by Jesus’ answer. He left with a heavy heart. In the Greek, the word, “saddened” here refers to the gloom of a grey, overcast, cloud filled sky. His countenance *clouded over* as he took in Jesus’ message. We can hope that this is an indication of the seriousness with which he received Jesus’ message.

We are left to complete the story, to imagine ourselves in this story. While we shout, “Amen” for every healing, do we also say “Amen” when Jesus’ words caution us about our attachment to the things of this world? Peter reminds Jesus that he and his companions have left everything behind to follow Jesus. In reply, Jesus gives what seems like an odd answer. He says they will have plenty of things in this life, which wasn’t necessarily true for his disciples. “I assure you that anyone who has left house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children, or farms because of me and because of the good news will receive one hundred times as much now in this life—houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and farms (with harassment)—and in the coming age, eternal life.

He throws a really strange phrase in there: with harassment or *with persecution*. This is the tension in which we must live. “Jesus determines salvation by how the rich interact with the poor,” writes Miguel A. de la Torre (Preaching God’s Transforming Justice, p. 442). Anyone who claims power and privilege…forfeits his or her claim to God’s eschatological promise, just like the rich young ruler. God’s reign is not promised to those who are oppressors or benefit from oppressive structures. To insist on such a lifestyle forfeits any claim to God’s hope…concentrating solely on personal faith divorced from praxis- actions of loving justice-encourages a cheap grace.”

So, when Jesus said, “Do not cheat,” maybe he meant just that. Dissociate yourself from oppressive and abusive systems. Jesus knew the truth that participating in oppression wounds oppressed and oppressor. So within that command of “do not cheat,” he could have also been saying, “do not cheat *yourself*. Do not cheat *yourself* out of the possibility of knowing community in a new way. Do not cheat *yourself* out of interactions with those who see the world through different eyes. Do not cheat *yourself* out of the opportunity to be needed, to be helpful, to effect change in this world.

That would be a helpful commandment, wouldn’t it? Don’t cheat yourself. This same story is told in Matthew and Luke, but Matthew adds a different commandment to the list that Jesus recites: “love your neighbor as yourself.” Don’t cheat. Love your neighbor. Love yourself, too. Don’t cheat yourself out of loving; don’t cheat yourself out of being loved. Don’t miss out on the possibility of living in the wide expanse of God’s transformative love.

Maybe Jesus’ story didn’t save that young man, but maybe it can save us. May it be so. Amen.