

Arrangements and Rearrangements

John Wilkinson
Third Presbyterian Church
October 11, 2015
Mark 10:17-31

Next Sunday, I will have the honor to preach at the Kihumo Presbyterian Parish just outside Nairobi, where five of us will be. My instructions were for a short message, some 30 minutes, and I couldn't help but think how fortunate you all are! Please do pray for us, for traveling mercies, for deepened faith, for strengthened connections between our Christian sisters and brothers in Kenya. We will post some things on a blog and Facebook and will also find time when we return back to tell our story. We are grateful for your prayers and for this opportunity.

When you think about Jesus, what comes to mind? What image, or label, or title, or role, resonates with you as you think about Jesus, when you think about him, if you do?

There are many out there, in the culture, in our tradition. Lord and savior, prophet and priest, brother and friend. Some are majestic and ethereal, others are homey and familiar. Because we have understood Jesus both as fully human and fully divine, we know him as the one who gets down on a knee to welcome a child and one who commands the troubled waters to be calm, one who eats with tax collectors and prostitutes, one who challenges the religious authorities, speaking truth to power, one who weeps, one who confronts, one who dies a shameful death, one who rises to defeat the grip of death. All of those, and more.

We will, in a bit, share a portion of a theological affirmation about Jesus (from the Presbyterian Brief Statement of Faith). Note what we say. For most of Christian history, we said very little about Jesus' life and ministry, emphasizing his death and resurrection. For example, the Apostles' Creed moves from "born of the Virgin Mary" to "suffered under Pontius Pilate" with only a comma, a punctuation mark, to remind us of all he did in his earthly ministry.

I think about Jesus in many ways as I navigate a day, both in my work and in my personal journey. I think about the Jesus who insisted that little children most reminded us of the kingdom of God as we work on public education reform in Rochester and Monroe County. I think about Jesus who was so compassionate as I sit next to a member, living in hospice, as she enters the last days of her life, or Jesus who healed as I visit a member in the hospital, facing chemotherapy, or a new hip. I think about the Jesus who called us to be one as we continue to wrestle as a church with division and schism. I will think this next week about Jesus who spoke

with so many different people, who related to and connected with all genders and races and nationalities and ethnicities, often defying his own religious convention, as we relate to and connect with our Kenyan friends and realize that the only barriers between race and class and culture and geography are the ones we construct, and, to the contrary, how good and pleasant and beautiful it is when we experience unity, unity in Jesus who unites us.

So I, and perhaps you, think about Jesus in many ways as we navigate our days, realizing that images or labels or titles or roles are endless, that Jesus meets us both where we are and takes us where we need to be.

That is what happens this morning. A man presents himself to Jesus. He has big questions on his mind. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" He calls Jesus "teacher," another compelling image – teacher. Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? We don't know here exactly what this man meant by eternal life, but we presume from what follows that it means some condition of life after death. It's a better question for another time, the understandings of life and eternal life and heaven in Jesus' time and how it influences our understandings today. Suffice it to say that this man is thinking about life after the living of his current days. He wants to know. So he asks. And Jesus responds.

When I think about Jesus, images and labels and titles and roles, here is one I think of the most, for me, for my own life: truth teller. We all have the capacity to fool ourselves about who we are, and we work very hard not to present our real and truest selves to the world around us, even to those closest to us. But I always believe that Jesus knows. He can look into our eyes – in this case literally and in our case figuratively and symbolically – and see into our hearts. He is truth teller, seeing us honestly just as we are and as we might be. That frightens us, as we work so hard to build facades. It also comforts us, as we work to become who God fully intends us to be.

Jesus is in full truth-telling mode here, with this man, who so earnestly comes to him. What must I do? You know the commandments, Jesus replies, and he works through the list. The man replies that not only does he know them, but he has lived by them, since he was a boy. Now, because we begin to go down that path, what we expect is some kind of legalistic reckoning. You said you did not steal, but I know you stole a candy bar from the 7-11 when you were eight. You said you did not bear false witness but I know you've said some pretty nasty things about your best friend behind his back. And so forth and so on.

Jesus presents the commandments and the man says he has followed him and we half expect Jesus to come up with instances when that has not been the case. But this is not theological inspection time, a legalistic litmus test to punch a heaven-bound ticket. No. In what may be the best moment of the whole thing, Jesus looks at this young man, into his eyes, into his spirit, and

he loves him, with compassion, mercy and hope. He loves him, and then he tells him the truth. He tells him he lacks one thing.

It is a gut-wrenching moment. What's next? Is it one more ethical challenge, one more commandment that he'd forgotten or didn't know about? You lack one thing. What? What? Anything! Tell me, and I will do it, because I seek eternal life.

And Jesus loved him for his earnestness and his desire, and he says "go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." We are told that "when he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions." And we are shocked too, for him, and perhaps for us.

After the man leaves, in shock and profound disappointment, Jesus continues teaching. Iconically, he reminds his followers how hard it will be for rich people to enter the kingdom of God, not impossible, but hard. Then he reminds them that when they give up everything – family, friends, finances – to follow him, they will receive blessings in abundance. "The first will be last and the last first," He knows that in the meantime, for the time being, being last offers little and being first promises much. That's why this young man went away so profoundly grieving. He knew how hard it would be to part with what he had, and, I believe, he also knows how important it would be for him to do it.

So many preachers and theologians say so much about what is going on here. Some try to soften the financial demand and some try to sharpen it. Some say that giving up all your money is a euphemism and some say that money is exactly the thing that prevents us from getting into heaven. Some say that the demand is for this particular instance, that Jesus would say something different to each of us about what we lack and some say that this is a very universal demand. That is the beautiful thing about faith, and the Bible, and who Jesus is and how we connect with him and him with us. That is why the role of truth teller, as the one who looks at us, into our eyes and our spirits, and who calls us to look into our own hearts, is so important.

Mark Vitalis Hoffman writes that this story is about the real cost of following Jesus, but that the financial element is only a part of the real and full cost. He writes: "Wealth is clearly a problem. The case of the well-behaved, socially-responsible, apparently-blessed rich man demonstrates how possessions can interfere with the more important need to follow Jesus as a disciple along the way that will lead to a cross...Ultimately we all have the same problem of earning our way into salvation. It can't be done. Jesus says, 'With humans it is impossible but not with God, for everything is possible with God.' This is not a cheap grace solution that allows us to carry on with business as usual. Something still has to change for God's impossible possibility to be realized."

Karoline Lewis reflects for us: "'You lack one thing.' Ouch. I fear I lack much more than one thing, do you? But what does this fellow lack, exactly?," she asks. "(B)y material standards, by society's standards, by the measures of the world that have determined the criteria for abundance and blessing, he lacks nothing -- nothing at all."

"The story," Lewis writes, "is frustratingly ambiguous and rather ambivalent which makes for an interpretive temptation to reduce this text to a message that is far too simplistic, but theologically easy. Let's just take Jesus literally. We *do* have too much. We need to give it away. We have not given out of our abundance. So we are eager to stand behind Jesus' injunctions against rich people. We readily chide those who hoard their wealth. We are quick to say to another, 'With all you have? Good luck getting through the eye of a needle, friend.' Yet all the while, we secretly wish we had wealth to hoard. Or at least more than we have. And then we have succeeded in wiggling out of Jesus' charge. 'I don't have money like this guy, so Jesus isn't talking to me.' And all of a sudden we've managed to escape Jesus' words to us, 'you lack one thing.'"

Howie Adan reminds us that Mark Twain once wrote: "You have heard it said, 'Don't put all your eggs in one basket', but I tell you, 'Put all your eggs in one basket....and watch that basket!'"

Adan continues: "The Rich Young Ruler had his eggs in a number of baskets, foremost his wealth and his religious observance. Still he lacks peace; he wants to be sure of how to secure eternal life. Jesus challenges him to put all his eggs in a different basket: 'sell everything you have and give to the poor...then come follow me.' The young man falsely believes Jesus is asking him to become destitute. Jesus is merely asking him to align his actions with his words, to be willing to exchange his material security for a more enduring source of purpose and contentment. Spiritual growth is as much about relinquishment as it is about attainment. Learning about the things we must grasp will do us no good if we don't learn about the things of which we must let go."

This story is about money, so is worth our contemplation. It is about more than money, and is worth, therefore, even more contemplation. It is about that moment when we ask, and Jesus looks us in the eye, and into our heart, and into our spirit, and loves us, and tells us what we need to know. Amen.