

Pentecost 20, October 10, 2021

Texts: Amos 5: 6-7, 10-15, Hebrews 4: 12-16, Mark 10: 17-31

In his commentary on today's gospel reading, Luis Menéndez-Antuña, Assistant Professor of New Testament at Boston University School of Theology, writes that what we have here is one of the most radical teachings in the Gospel of Mark.

Radical is an interesting word choice. In theological settings it is sometimes used with a meaning similar to prophetic. In politics we use this word to discredit opponents for their uncompromising positions. The labels "the radical left" or "the radical right" imply extremism, bias, lack of realistic vision. Whichever the group, by using this label we are clearly describing them as not only wrong but dangerous. We have to defend ourselves against them.

But digging into word's origin takes us in a different direction. Radical comes from *radix*, *radicis* and refers to the roots of a plant or of a problem or the grounding assumptions of an argument. Saying that this teaching of Jesus is radical suggests that it tackles a root question: What is discipleship and the essence of Christian identity? Is it what I do or who I follow?

Mark tells us that the twelve, the closest disciples of Jesus, had left everything behind to follow him, everything, including house and household, family, and belongings. Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem, surrounded by this group who have made a radical choice in following him when this man comes with his question.

Matthew tells us this man was young. Luke says he was a certain ruler. Mark mentions neither. From Mark, we learn only that he is wealthy, and that his wealth allows him leisure to pursue religious study and practice. He appears to be a pious observant of the Law. Beyond this, we know nothing of his character, his position in his family, his community, or the source of his wealth.

The question he brings to Jesus appears to be born from his piety and a sense that somehow, all that he does is not enough. He is truly searching. "I do these things that the commandments require. What else must I do to inherit eternal life?"

That Mark says, "Jesus, looking at him, loved him," before answering his question tells us something as well. This man is the only person in the Gospel Jesus is said to love. Unlike the scribes and pharisees and Sadducees who came to Jesus with questions designed to trap him, this man brings a question born of his own faith journey.

He comes to Jesus, open and vulnerable saying, "Jesus, tell me what I need to do, and I will do it." Jesus recognizes and responds to this. He does not treat him as insincere or mock him as self-righteous. He loves him. Jesus, looking at this man, listening to his question, encounters in him one who knows that for all he does to live a God-pleasing life he is still falling short.

That makes even more remarkable the man's response to Jesus' instruction, "sell all that you have and give the money to the poor, and then come, follow me".

*Stugnasas*, the Greek word used here to describe how the man went away, is usually translated "shocked," "surprised" or "in sorrow," words that evoke a feeling. But the meaning of this word goes beyond this temporary range of emotions. It's not just that the man is surprised or saddened by what Jesus instructs him to do. Confronted with a radical choice, hang on to what I have or let it go of it all, he experiences a crisis of character. He walks away grieving because he cannot do what Jesus instructs him to do.

With that, this part of the story ends. We have no idea what became of this man, what he did after walking away. Did he continue to struggle? Did he ultimately do as Jesus directed him or not? We are given no clues from which to speculate. That none of the gospels tell us suggests that the point in reporting this encounter is not what ultimately became of this man. This story is told to raise the question, "what becomes of us?"

Insert yourself into this story now. If you saw Jesus, would you, like this man, come up to him with that question? Or would you, basically satisfied with your faith life, your relationship with God, not even think to ask that question? If you were dissatisfied, or even just curious enough to ask, what would your response to Jesus' direction be?

This man was shocked by what Jesus told him to do. So were the disciples. Given that wealth was considered a sign of God's blessing in the first century, and still is in the twenty-first, why would Jesus tell this man to get sell all that he had? We are shocked as well. After all, who wouldn't be shocked by Jesus telling us to do the one thing we cannot do?

Jesus' commentary to the disciples after this young man left delivers another shock. "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And again, "Children, how hard it is 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." Hearing this, the disciples give the obvious response, "If a rich man, obviously blessed by God, can't enter the kingdom, who can be saved?"

Presented with this juxtaposition of disciples who have truly given up all to follow Jesus and this rich man who cannot do this we ask, where does this leave us? It all comes down to that root question of discipleship and Christian identity, a root question that calls for a radical response.

Inherent in the man's question is a limit. He doesn't ask what road to walk, he asks what is my next step? We like that. It makes sense to us, keeps us in control. Give me a next step and I can do it. The problem is, Jesus doesn't give a next step. Instead, he proposes a great leap of faith. He invites the man to surrender his whole being. Let go of your wealth, your property, the slaves that manage it for you. Let go of your status. Let go of it all and follow me.

Remember back to the beginning of the gospel when Jesus recruited that group of disciples? He simply called out to them, “follow me.” And they did, not considering what they were leaving behind, not knowing what they were getting themselves into. They did it without thinking. Their amazement at Jesus’ response to the man shows that they still don’t realize what they’ve done.

So to us, a congregation in this transitional time in our journey. Our thoughts are on steps. Pastor Roger retired. What did we do? We secured an interim pastor, then named a transition team, did some self-study, named a call committee and let that committee do its work. Soon we will meet a proposed candidate. Hopefully that will lead to a congregational meeting to vote on extending a call.

These are logical and appropriate steps. I don’t think Jesus would discount them. But all these steps keep us in control.

In instructing this unnamed man, Jesus instructs us to let go of that which is most important to us, to surrender ourselves to Jesus and follow him. The radical question this text asks us is this: Do we trust God enough to do this, to let God be in control? Do we trust God enough to surrender our definition of who we are and what our mission is and instead, as Pastor Keith has suggested, say, “God show us your mission for this congregation and we will follow where you lead.”

After this man walked away grieving, Jesus told his disciples there are no steps anyone can take to earn eternal life. We can only receive it. We receive it only by placing ourselves in the hands of the only one who can give it. In doing that, like those first disciples who responded to Jesus’ call, we leave all else behind and follow, saying only, “It is enough to go where Jesus leads. We don’t need to be in control of the journey.”

I don’t know about you but doing that scares me.