

Letting Go and the Freedom It Brings

Proper 23B

Hebrews 4:12-16

Mark 10:17-31

**Rev. Dr. Laura Blazek
St. Michael's Episcopal Church
Norman, OK
October 13, 2024**

Our reading from Hebrews says, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15) In other words, Jesus was made man. These words are the subject of a long-standing controversy in the Christian Church causing arguments, fights, and even bloodshed for over two thousand years. Trying to wrap our minds around Jesus Christ’s dual nature as both human and God is challenging at best. But if we ignore his humanity, then we take away from Jesus his ability to understand what it means to be human.

Some of his human experiences we read about in scripture. He was tempted in the desert after his baptism. At a water well, he asks a Samaritan woman for a drink to quench his thirst. Standing at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, Jesus wept. He suffered humiliation, pain, and death upon the cross. His other human experiences we infer from the stories and his life as a carpenter’s son—vulnerability, physical hardship, times of weakness, and emotional turmoil. These human experiences allow Christ to truly meet us where we are in our life. To sympathize with our weaknesses. To share in our joys. To feel our pain.

His ability to sympathize with us is by no means a free pass to live our lives with reckless abandon, ignoring the consequences of our choices. Because Jesus is also God, he sees past all the deceptions and lies that we tell ourselves, past our bravado and B.S., straight into the core of what drives us. What a friend we have in Jesus. A true friend who loves us enough to call us to account, forcing us to face truths, no matter how unpleasant or uncomfortable they may be, even to the point of risking the relationship.

We can see this in today’s Gospel story of the rich man whom Jesus let walk away. Notice that the rich man ran to Jesus and knelt before him. This wasn’t a casual encounter. He needed Jesus to heal what was missing in his life. To fill the emptiness in his life that his possessions couldn’t fill. He asks, “Good Teacher, I have everything I could ever dream of owning. I live a life of leisure and keep the commandments. Yet I still feel empty. Something is missing. What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

However, the eternal life that he is asking about isn’t the same one that Jesus is talking about. We tend to think that we have to earn our way to eternal life by racking up points, sort of like racking

up frequent flyer miles to earn a free first-class ticket to our dream destination. Even the disciples were astounded to learn that you can't buy your way into the kingdom. Peter, his face likely looking like a thundercloud says, "Look Jesus, we gave up everything for you." I suspect he was going to launch into an angry tirade, but Jesus cuts him off. He tells them that doing things from a place of unconditional love and trusting in God's grace is the way to the kingdom, both now and in the age to come.

Grace.

Mercy.

Despite all our human failings and weaknesses, God offers grace and mercy to us. In doing so, he brings us into the presence of the divine through a new existence where we fully know and love God and each other in the world in which we live. This is eternal life- both now and in the age to come. It is here where we get a sense of belonging. Where we find happiness and love. Where that unknown quantity that we sense is missing in our lives is filled, making us whole and complete.

There are no points to be earned. You can't buy this in a store, despite what our materialistic culture tells you. It is freely given. By living a life of service to others through unconditional love, we become free. To become free, we must let go of those things that bind us. Jesus tells the rich man to get rid of all he owns and give the proceeds to the poor. Jesus saw what the rich man couldn't- he had become a slave to his possessions. He didn't own them; they owned him. All he had to do to free himself from their grasp was to let go of them and turn to a new existence of following Jesus. But at that moment, he couldn't. He walked away from following Jesus and his promise of eternal life.

And I wonder, how often do we do that? Run to Jesus asking for help only to turn away because we think he is asking too much? When have we refused to let go of the various things that enslave such as hatred, conceit, or envy? How often do we think we are following Jesus only to discover that we really aren't?

Uncertainty is part of being human. Jesus meets us on that path of uncertainty and brings us home. Jesus became human, stretching out his hand to guide us toward the Kingdom of God that we can build together. Even when we aren't exactly certain what we should be doing to follow Christ's commandment to love, seeking God's guidance and grace can help bring peace.

We may not fully understand it, this immense love that God has for us, yet we are called to share it. Through his life and love Jesus showed us how to build the Kingdom by sharing what we have with others. Unconditional love looks like service to the world around us. Helping each other in whatever way we can brings happiness and improves our well-being. Sharing the gifts we have received from God give us a sense of belonging to something greater than ourselves.

Thomas Merton, a twentieth-century Trappist Monk, wrote the following prayer in his book *Thoughts in Solitude*:

*My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.*

*But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.*

*Therefore will I trust you always
though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.*

Amen.