Pentecost 20, October 10, 2021, ASC

Jesus has a strange way of showing love sometimes. In the Gospel today a young man runs up to Jesus and falls down at his feet, eager to be reassured, or maybe just praised, by Jesus. Although he asks the question, “Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” he is actually pretty confident in his status because he has kept all the commandments since his youth; what does he have to worry about? So, looking at this young man, “Jesus loved him”, but not by giving him what the young man thought he wanted- praise and reassurance. Instead, Jesus invited him to turn his whole life upside down, to try a whole other way of following God. Not just by following the ten commandments but by selling all his possessions, giving away the money, and leaving home to follow Jesus on the road. “And the man was shocked, and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”

Despite this young man walking away, I would argue that Jesus achieved his goal. He loved this young man and saw his desire to be good in the eyes of God. But he also knew the young man had come seeking affirmation that he was a good and favored person. Jesus rejects the word good even for himself, reminding the young man that only God is truly good. “You lack one thing,” Jesus said. And what Jesus gave him in challenging him to what he knew was a nearly impossible goal, was humility. The young man had to grieve his status, let go of his pride and understand that even he, as a righteous man, was fully dependent on God’s forgiving love to give him eternal life; he couldn’t earn it himself. Do you know the saying: “*God doesn’t love us because we are good; God loves us because God is good.”*

So what might Jesus ask any of us to give up or let go, that would bring us to our knees in humble awareness of our need for God’s love? It might be money or property as in today’s story, but it could be social rank, educational status, racial privilege, health and strength. Maybe it depends on our stage or experience of life, what we put our trust in to protect us.

Many years ago Lindsay and I went on a year’s sabbatical with our young children. We moved to the Bay Area in CA where we had a few friends and family, but mostly made up a new life for ourselves, walking the kids to school, taking some classes, enjoying lots of excursions to the mountains, the city, and the ocean. It was a wonderful year and bonded our family in new ways. But another transformational thing about that year was that almost no one knew or cared about our several educational degrees, my ordination status, Lindsay’s athletic achievements. After having lived and worked for many years in a boarding school community where all those things were known and seemed to matter a lot, it felt strangely dislocating at first. I had to think about who I was and what mattered to me, what mattered about me, without all those other labels I had carried in the world like a badge of honor and protection. I had to confront the fact that God doesn’t care about those labels at all, but only about the content of my character and the openness of my heart.

Jesus knows that when we’re over-confident in our own deservedness, we limit our capacity to know God’s love for us and to love others with mercy and generosity. When we feel we’ve earned our privileges, because we’re special and deserve them, we create two problems- one, we become arrogant and forget our own need for God’s forgiveness and love, and two, what are we implying about others who have not been so fortunate or privileged? That they are less lovable, less worthy in God’s eyes?

In the last two Sundays’ Gospel lessons, Jesus actually draws a little child into his lap and asks us to be like them, to remind us that we’re closer to God and to God’s kingdom when we’re vulnerable and open and aware of our own need for care and protection. Thus, he says, many who are first will be last and the last will be first.

This is a funny pair of lessons, on one hand in last week’s Gospel to invite us to crawl into Jesus’ lap and rest in the arms of God like a little child, and on the other to give up all we have, leave the security of our home and possessions and follow Jesus. One seems so comforting and the other so scary! But in the end both stories are asking us to put our whole selves in God’s hands.

In this and many other Gospel stories, Jesus shows concern about the effect of wealth on people’s ability to trust in God, that the wealthy put too much trust in our material comforts, our investment accounts and insurance policies, and not enough in God. Sometimes it takes a disabling accident, a cancer diagnosis, a flood, a bankruptcy or a job loss to remind us that all our attempts to secure our lives with money and material comforts can disappear in a moment.

It seems to me that the more we trust in God’s guidance and love, the less attached we become to the things this world values. The more we believe we are cared for unconditionally, the more we can be generous and share what we have with others without worrying whether they deserve it or not. The more we feel that our money and possessions are gifts and not rights, the more we can hold them with open hands and let them flow through our lives and onto others. The more we understand that our social status, education, career achievements, or physical fitness are not what make us worthy or lovable in God’s eyes, the more open we feel toward those who are different from us, the more connected we feel to all people. Instead of finding our security in being different and special somehow, we find it in belonging, belonging to God’s family as a beloved child.

One of my clergy colleagues said to me last week, “you know, we never hear the end of that story. The young man went home upset, but for all we know he might still have sold everything and set out on a life of faith! Who knows?” As Jesus says, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” May God make it possible for us also to follow God faithfully, give generously, and love freely. Amen.

(The Rev. Louise Howlett)