

Reflection for World Food Sunday, October 14, 2018

Based on Mark 10: 17-31

Offered by: Rev. Liz Bowyer

For: the people at Trinity United, Vernon, B.C.

If ever there was a good set of readings to really chew on, surely this morning's readings fit the bill.

Lengthier than usual, this morning's text from Mark's gospel consists of three overlapping conversations.

In the first conversation, we come upon a conversation between Jesus, the Good Teacher, and a character many biblical scholars would call a rich young ruler.

As the scene opens, we learn that this man comes to Jesus, kneels before him, and poses the question: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

From there, Jesus talks back and forth with the man about how his life has been lived out to date.

As we listen to the commandments the man has kept, we might be inclined to think "All good, so far".

Until that is, we come to the punchline when Jesus tells the man: "You lack one thing: go, sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and then when you have done that, come and follow me."*

At this point in the conversation, we can almost hear Jesus' listeners' gasping as they try to put meaning to his words.

We can almost see the colour drain from the young man's face and his shoulders slump.

Then, we might almost sense his palpable discouragement as he takes his leave and as a gloomy cloud of foreboding settles over those remaining present.

Next, we experience Jesus making the most of the teachable moment as he engages all those pondering what has just happened with another statement:

“How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter God’s kingdom!” he says.*

Now, even his perplexed followers start murmuring amongst themselves.

I can almost hear them muttering to themselves, ‘if it would be nigh unto impossible for a rich man to enter into God’s kingdom, then what hope have we?’

As their astonishment gains momentum, their plaintive question emerges:

“Who then can be saved?!?”*

Once again, Jesus seizes upon the teachable moment, reminding all who have ears to hear, that God’s ways are vastly different than the ways of humanity.

No sooner do the folks begin to digest this mysterious message, than Peter, ever the contrarian, speaks up.

‘Jesus’, he says, ‘We left everything behind, we followed you. What’s to become of us then?’

And so it is, we come to the final conversation of this morning’s reading.

Here, Jesus assures Peter not to worry—all shall ultimately be well, yes, there will be persecution but ultimately, all shall be well.

Indeed, he reassures his listeners, in God’s coming realm, “many who are first shall be last, and the last shall be first.”*

Three conversations, three unsettling and pivotal moments for Jesus’ followers, and by extension, for us gathered here this morning.

This is a lot to digest as we celebrate World Food Sunday and as we wonder about this perplexing and astounding passage from the 10th chapter of Mark’s gospel.

For me, what Jesus asks both of and from us in this story, what Jesus is hoping for us as we reflect together on the text feels costly and demanding.

For me, it feels as though Jesus has raised the bar on discipleship, perhaps to impossible heights.

Thinking back on the context of the text, I remember this:

Here in the 10th chapter of Mark's gospel, Jesus comes directly face to face with the perils and the demands of his own call to discipleship.

Here, he turns his face to Jerusalem and his death on the cross.

So, there's a sense of urgency here as Jesus responds to the rich young ruler's slightly naïve notion that he can tweak or maneuver his way into God's kingdom.

There's a sense of absurdity to the man's question about inheritance.

Here we learn along with the man, God's kingdom is not for sale.

Here Jesus reminds him and all who are within earshot that following in his way, that calling ourselves disciples eager to be about the building of God's kingdom, God's peaceable realm is no easy road.

Here, we, along with the rich young ruler, the crowding throngs, the disciples, and even Peter, here, we come to see clearly that Jesus' invitation to join him will cost us dearly.

Here Jesus reminds us that feigning respect and admiration for Jesus' wisdom will not get us where God wants and needs us to go.

It's not hard to feel the shock that the man and the disciples must have felt at Jesus' prescription for faithful living.

Jesus' invitation to all of us to relinquish all manner of things holding us hostage to the status quo is not for the faint of heart or for the dubious of faith.

Even in the midst of all these feelings of doubt and fear and confusion though, I am aware of Jesus' constant, abiding, and unconditional love for his listeners and his followers.

Whether disheartened, dismayed, perplexed, or astonished, Jesus is present.

Here, in Mark's gospel, Jesus looks upon those who grapple with discipleship with an abundantly gracious and unconditional love.

The question emerging for me is this: Jesus 'gets' us but do we 'get' him?

This morning as we continue to digest all we have been about in your 6th annual celebration of World Food Sunday, as we sit with our own thoughts and feelings about what it means to be blessed with comfort and security in a world where the gap between the rich and the poor is ever before us, we might be inclined to tune out or turn off.

We might be inclined to wonder if we are up for the journey of discipleship or if we are even making a dent in the problem of world food hunger.

Is there any good news to be found?

Here's what I know: Wherever we find ourselves standing on the road of faith-whether we find yourself feeling discouraged and disheartened, disgruntled or ill at ease, God, in Jesus, stands with us.

I also know that the hardest journey begins with the first step. Today, perhaps our first step is just to sit with the discomfort of the topic.

But know this: Our relentless loving, patient, and gracious God, through Jesus is ready to love us into new life and the kingdom when we are ready.

Thanks be to God, amen!

Some of the resources that helped shape this reflection include:

*Holy Bible, New Standard Revised Version, Mark's Gospel, Chapter 10: 17-31

** Borg, Marcus, J., CONVERSATIONS WITH SCRIPTURE, THE GOSPEL OF MARK, Morehouse Publishing, Harrisburg, PA, 2009

***In the Meantime, Pentecost 21 B-The Rich Man and the Rest of Us, David J.Lose