

First Presbyterian Church
“Close Encounters of the Jesus Kind: A Rich Ruler”
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March 13, 2022

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Luke 18:18-30

Things had started well. In the beginning they were approved of and appreciated for their allegiance to the church and to the Papacy. But over time this changed, not their allegiance to the Papacy but the appreciation of the Papacy for them. In fact, in the eyes of many Popes and church leaders, these people became seen as some of the most dangerous members of the church. They were so dangerous that many of them were arrested, deposed, excommunicated, and even executed. Their battle with the Papacy was waged off and on for more than two hundred years as the church attempted to bring them to heel. So, who were these most dangerous of people? Who were these folks who were seen by many as an existential threat to the church? They were the Order of Friars Minor, or as we know them, the Franciscans. The Franciscans were seen as a danger to the church because they believed that followers of Christ, and especially those who served Christ in the church, should own nothing. Poverty and compassion, rather than wealth and power, were to be the marks of the church. They were, if you will, an uncomfortable reminder not only of Jesus’ own mendicant ways, but of Jesus’ words to the rich ruler.

My guess is that if we are honest with ourselves this morning, the Franciscans and their continuing vows of poverty, make us a bit nervous as well, as does this story out of Luke. I say this because over the years of my ministry this story is one that always causes great consternation. It is probably one of the most asked about stories in my ministry including questions such as: “John, do you really think we are supposed to be poor?” “Do you think we are supposed to sell all that we have and give it to the poor?” I think people ask because, well, none of us want to be poor beggars on the street. None of us want to be those who stand on street corners with a sign saying, I follow Jesus so will pray for food. We like what money provides. We like a warm place to stay. We like having food in our fridge and pantry. We like to travel (he says as he prepares to take a vacation). So when I say we, I mean we, including me, because I am always appreciative of the generosity of this church that pays my salary, health care, and pension. With that having been said, the question is, is Jesus calling us to a life of poverty?

The simple answer is, no. I say this because Jesus never asks all his followers to do the same. Though his disciples remind Jesus that they have given up everything, Jesus never makes this a rule for following. When, after his resurrection, he finds his followers fishing, he does not castigate them and insist that they give up their family businesses. Ultimately, they chose to do so, but the church understood that people needed to work. The Apostle Paul in fact castigates Christians who quit working because they believed that Jesus was returning any moment...and so those folks begged from other Christians who were still working. Paul also addressed the obligations of the wealthy to share what they possessed. Finally, if we look at the passage from Deuteronomy, we read that what is set before the people as they are about to enter the Land of Promise is “...life and prosperity, death and adversity.” In other words, God desires that people not be poor, but have their needs met so that they might enjoy the life that God gives them – that God gives us. So again, what is Jesus up to?

My answer is that Jesus is trying to save this man by getting him to stop pursuing and start following. Let me explain. The rich ruler in the passage was a man on a mission and had been a man on a mission his whole life. His first mission was to become rich and powerful. How do I know this? I know this because no one in First Century Galilee or Judea became wealthy simply by having a good job, great stock options, or by being a frugal saver. The economy of this time and place was one of subsistence farming, animal husbandry, or small shop keepers. Unlike today where someone can create a successful business, pay their employees well, and make a profit that allows wealth to be accumulated, this was not the case in the time of Jesus. To be a rich ruler one had to purchase power and then use that power to cheat others. This would entail using one's connections to loan money at high rates of interest, foreclose on those who defaulted, purchase the property of struggling farmers, and merge field after field into larger holdings while paying as little as possible to workers. This was the only way to become wealthy and so this rich ruler had been pursuing wealth.

This man's second mission was to find a way to be part of God's inbreaking Kingdom, the Kingdom of eternal life. We see this in his question to Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life." Note carefully that he asks about what he must do. This implies that entry into the Kingdom is something that can be pursued and caught, like one pursues and catches an animal. He tells Jesus that his pursuit of eternal life has consisted of obeying the many commandments of Moses; something that the rich ruler had done from his youth. What this implies is that just as he pursued and caught wealth, he could pursue and catch the Kingdom. It is at this point then that Jesus tells him to sell all that he has and follow. In other words, Jesus says you cannot pursue and catch the kingdom of God. You can only follow Jesus into it. You can only enter the kingdom by following in the way of God, by loving God and neighbor and doing one's best to live in imitation of Jesus. Pursuit of anything else takes people in the wrong direction. It moves people away from the path of Jesus and into a path that cannot bring the life and peace that Christ can offer. This is what Jesus means when he says that those who follow him will get back much more in this age and in the age to come.

Year ago, Cindy and I liked to watch *The Apprentice*, the show that made Donald Trump famous. The show had various people competing against one another for a coveted place in the Trump Organization. It is where the phrase, "You're fired!" gained prominence. But there came a moment when I soured on the show. It was not something that Trump said or did, but it was what one of the contestants said. He said something to the effect of, "I want to be Trump. I want the helicopter, and the plane, and the penthouse, and the wealth." And it wasn't just what he said, but how he said it. You could hear the longing for these things as if they were the be all and end all of existence. This is pursuing. This is what our society encourages us to do. We are supposed to pursue these things to the exclusion of almost anything else. But ultimately, all the wealth, power, and privilege will not give us what following Christ can offer, because my friends, pursuing says enough is never enough. In following Christ, we can do well, use our gifts, save, enjoy life, serve others, share what we have, and in the process, find a peace that really does pass understanding. We can find the Kingdom of God opening before us and welcoming us in.

The challenge I want to offer all of us this morning is this, to ask ourselves, "How am I ceasing my pursuing and increasing my following?"