

PILGRIM

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An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

TAKING THAT FIRST STEP

Mark 10: 17-31 October 11, 2009

Pilgrim Bud Precise

The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. Taking that first step into the future can be a difficult task. Getting ready for the first day of school. The first day of a new job. Going out on a first date. The first Kemo therapy treatment. Selling all you have (giving it to the poor) and following Jesus. That last example is the step into the future that Jesus recommends to the man in our text in Mark for today.

We often call this the story about the rich, young ruler. I like the Mark version of this story. Mark first calls him a man. Later in verse 22, we find out that he is a wealthy man. It is the Luke account that identifies him as a “ruler.” Matthew is the account that calls him “young.” For Mark, he seems to be just a regular guy, although he has “great possessions.”

The story begins well enough. The man asks a question about salvation from the stand point of keeping the law. “Good teacher, what must I DO to inherit eternal life?” No reason to doubt his sincerity – he kneels before Jesus and asks a basic question – a question that many people have and will ask. Jesus has just taught that whoever does not receive the kingdom as a little child will never enter the kingdom. The man obviously did not hear this teaching. Now he kneels before Jesus asking, “What must I do?” The man’s mind set, so often typical of those who are privileged, is contradictory to the teaching of Jesus. Maybe the man is thinking he has everything else – (if that is what ‘great possessions means) and the ultimate question for him is inheriting eternal life. Rather than understanding the kingdom as complete dependence, in his world, the rich man wants to know what he can do to inherit the kingdom. The tension is in his question. Inheritance rarely depends on one doing anything. By definition, and inheritance is something that can be only given.

Jesus ignores the “inherit eternal life” and reframes the question in terms of the Kingdom of God. It is the same answer that Jesus gives to the Pharisee who asked the same question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus asked the Pharisee, “What is written in the law? How do you read? How do you interpret it?” The Pharisee answered, “Love the Lord with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.” So Jesus left it there, “You have answered correctly, do this and you will live,” But the Pharisee wanted to justify himself and asked, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus tells the story we know as “The Good Samaritan. Jesus turns the focus away from the Pharisee’s concern about his salvation toward the gracious behavior to others. The question about personal salvation takes a back seat to the care and concern for the other shown by the Samaritan. This man in our text today begins

with the same concern – personal salvation. Jesus actually gives the man something more he can do. “God sell what you have, give the money to the poor, and come follow me.” It is again a turning from personal salvation to the care and concern for others.

The man goes away – the only person in all of scripture to come to Jesus and not follow Jesus. And the reason is money.

Now, how in the world is receiving the Kingdom as a little child like selling all you own and giving it to the poor? The text gets more confusing. “It is impossible for a rich person (Incidentally, the very person that that society considered divinely blessed!) to enter the kingdom. And if that is not enough, Jesus concludes by turning everything upside down: “But many who are first will be last and the last will be first.” It will be difficult to resolve the tensions presented in our text.

The text contains extreme demands – sell everything and give give it to the poor and follow me.

The text contains extreme judgement – it is impossible for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God

The text contains extreme promises – both of grace and reward.

I don't believe we can turn this text into a “new law” that requires all wealthy people to literally sell everything, give to the poor and there by to earn eternal life. That does not sound like good stewardship to me. At the same time, we cannot ignore the sharp words of Jesus to those whose wealth has become the very center of their lives. Wealth has become more important that righteous (word means right living) living. Wealth has become first in their life. By worldly standards, we in this room are the wealthy in this world. The text can make us feel guilty. The Kingdom does not call for us to give away all we have at once. But life in the Kingdom is about caring and sharing what we have with others – and that does include our wealth. The Kingdom of God does call for new behavior, new steps in our living.

We all know those first steps can be very difficult, and sometimes painful.

Let me remind us of some of those steps that are difficult and painful;

Attending that first AA meeting.

Calling a marriage counselor.

Calling a lawyer about divorce.

Talking to the son or daughter about marijuana found in jeans pocket – or in my

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case talking to a member of our youth group and parents when the youth is caught selling marijuana at our Sunday night youth group meeting.

Coming “out of the closet.”

Hearing a call to ministry.

The text does remind us that God is always present with us. What ever or where ever or when ever we take that first step – however difficult or painful, we can be confident of God’s presence with us on that journey. We need that presence of God at our most difficult times. I would remind us today, that many times, we, those of us who are on this journey following after Jesus, we, who are in our own day, the People of God, are many times that presence of God to those who need encouraging, caring and understanding. Let us be willing to take that first step in our own discipleship. And let us be willing to be that presence of God to those among us who need to know that God is with us. Amen