

Walking Away from Love
Amos 5:10-15, Mark 10:17-31
October 22, 2006

On the surface the man who knelt before Jesus seems to have his life together. He follows the commandments of his Jewish faith. Near the end of his story we learn that he is wealthy, having many possessions—perhaps the fruit of a successful career. His economic status must gain him respect and authority in the community. This man appears to have his act together and just wants to make sure that all is in order before “his time comes.”

But Mark gives us some clues that paint a different picture. The man kneels before Jesus. In Mark’s gospel, those seeking healing from Jesus tend to kneel at his feet. A leper came begging him, and kneeling said to Jesus, “If you choose, you can make me clean” (1:40). Jairus, one of the leaders of the synagogue, fell at Jesus’ feet, begging him to lay hands on his daughter and make her well (5:23). The woman with the hemorrhage who touched Jesus’ clothes fell down before him and told him her story (5:33). Those who kneel before Jesus have a dis-ease and a need for healing.

This is our first clue that all is not well with this rich man of faith. He kneels before Jesus seeking healing. We are not told the name of his dis-ease. Perhaps it is affluenza, a contemporary term for the “parade of pathologies” that afflicts the rich as well as the poor. Today studies show that the rich are sometimes even more anxious, depressed, and underemployed than the poor. Although we must be careful not to project our culture onto first century Middle Eastern culture, there is a clue here that this wealthy man is not whole in body and spirit.

Our second clue is the man’s question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” He recognizes that there is something missing in his life. He is seeking wholeness. The rich man’s secure status in life leads him to ask the wrong question: what can I do to inherit eternal life? Most inheritances are a gift. This is indeed true with eternal life – everlasting life in relationship with God beginning now. It is a gift. There is nothing we can do to earn it or buy it or inherit it; it is purely grace. We simply need to let go and relax into relationship with God. We need to trust God to give us the security we need. It is in loving God that we are blessed with eternal life.

Do you notice anything strange about the Ten Commandments Jesus recites? He does not list the first four having to do with our relationship with God and the call to remember the Sabbath. The order of the remaining commandments differs from the account in Exodus. He leaves out the call not to covet, but he adds a commandment not to defraud. Why would Jesus

add this commandment here? Perhaps Jesus or Mark was aware that the man had illegally gained his wealth through fraud. If he was a large landowner with employees, he may have illegally withheld wages from his workers. We don't know for certain. The Bible doesn't answer all our questions, and we can't read into the text what isn't there. But Mark has some interesting phrases that may be hints of deeper issues.

Upon the man's sincere reply that he had kept the commandments since his youth, "Jesus looked at him, loving him." With that loving gaze, Jesus sees beyond the surface façade deep into the man's heart, into the emptiness, into the gap where something is missing. The man is so caught up in finding security by following the rules and accumulating wealth that he lacks that which makes life meaningful: love. This is the only place in Mark where Jesus is described as loving someone. While Jesus has just recited several of the Ten Commandments, now he is practicing the "great commandment." Jesus gives his love and invites the man to love his neighbor in return. What is lacking in this man's life is love: love as relationship with God and love as concrete action on behalf of one's neighbor.

This is the prescription Jesus offers for the man's dis-ease: "Go, sell what you own, give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." "Go" is a command used in Mark's healing stories, part of the invitation to healing. Jesus is encouraging the man to be healed of the ailment of accumulation.

The second command, "sell what you have," echoes the first, for Jesus calls him from the security of wealth into the adventure of discipleship. That which he seeks will be found in letting go of those possessions that possess him. In releasing that which gives him false security, he will become vulnerable. In the midst of vulnerability, he will realize that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves, to earn eternal life. Only God can save us. We usually don't grasp this saving grace until we allow ourselves to be fragile.

The third phrase is interesting. Jesus directs the man's wealth to be distributed to the poor. If it is true that his wealth has been gained by defrauding the poor, he must make restitution. "For Mark, the law is kept only through concrete acts of justice, not the façade of piety."¹

The fourth part of the prescription is, "Come, follow me." He is called into an active relationship with Jesus, a new way of living, sometimes insecure, but the way toward wholeness of life. The Jesus way is best summarized by the greatest commandments, "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself."

This is not what the rich man expected. He anticipated a pat on the back for faithfully following the commandments and for the worldly success he had earned. Instead, he is invited into relationship and out of slavery to rules. He is called to give away his riches and live depending on God to supply his needs. He is called to love, love of God and love of neighbor, love to be received and given. This way of love is much too radical. It shakes the core of his being even to think of it. He walks away from love. He can neither receive nor give. He leaves Jesus harboring the same emptiness with which he had arrived. He is one of few who reject the wholeness of life offered by Jesus. He turns his back and walks away from love.

We can learn from the experience of this man. God's love is freely given, but this gift is so awesome that we can't help but share it. We give it away in thanksgiving for having received. We mustn't make the mistake of walking away from God's gift of love, nor of walking away from those in need of love. We must share it with the poor, the vulnerable, the weak, those in need of concrete, tangible expressions of love. That's mission – getting outside of ourselves, loving God, and serving our neighbor.

At age 53 John D. Rockefeller was the richest man in the world in his day. Yet Rockefeller was told that he had less than a year to live. His hair and eyelashes fell out; he could eat only milk and crackers; he couldn't sleep; and he was wasting away.

Tossing and turning on his bed one morning, John Rockefeller remembered the words of Jesus about the dangers of laying up treasures on this earth. He got out of bed and determined to work as hard at giving his money away as he had worked at making it. The result was that Rockefeller's money was converted into love and life for countless people: research grants funded by his gifts developed the cures for malaria, diphtheria and tuberculosis, as well as the discovery of penicillin. That's just the beginning of what Rockefeller's giving did to make the world a better place for people to live. That giving meant life for Rockefeller himself. In the process of giving away what he had, he recovered his health, and lived another 44 years to the age of 98.²

In the September newsletter of the Lafayette Chamber of Commerce, Chamber President Budd MacKenzie shared some interesting statistics. "One-half of the world's population or 3 billion people live on less than \$2 a day. Providing adequate food, clean water, and basic education for the world's poorest could all be achieved for less than people spend annually on makeup, ice cream, and pet food." Annually we spend \$18 billion on makeup; it would take an annual investment of \$12 billion to provide

reproductive health care for all women. In the United States and Europe, \$17 billion is spent a year on pet food; we could eliminate hunger and malnutrition with \$19 billion a year. \$15 billion a year is spent on perfumes; universal literacy could be provided for \$5 billion a year. Perhaps we don't need to give away all that we have, but if we all alter our consumption patterns, we could make a mighty big difference in the world. I know that there are habits and excesses in my life that could be changed for my own benefit and for that of others.

We might even find ourselves happier. "An assessment of life satisfaction in more than 65 countries conducted between 1900 and 2000 indicate that income and happiness tend to track well until about \$13,000 of annual income per person. After that, additional income appears to yield only modest additions in self-reported happiness."³ Once our basic needs are met, money doesn't buy happiness.

Through our unified giving as United Methodists, we make a major difference in the world in places suffering from poverty, disease, disaster, and violence. The yellow insert in our worship guide tells of the monies United Methodists spend for missions around the world. We support ministries from the inner cities to the rural areas of the Appalachian Mountains to sub-Saharan Africa, hit by 70% of the world's 65 million people living with HIV/AIDS.⁴

United Methodists don't walk away from love, either receiving or giving. John Wesley preached of the grace of God, the freely given gift of God's love to all. God's love is available for us to receive and, in turn, to give away. We are called to walk in love with one another and with our neighbors in need. We walk in love because it is in getting outside of ourselves to give and serve others that the emptiness within is filled. We walk in love because it is in giving that we receive. In loving, giving, and serving we find the wholeness of life which we seek.

Let us never turn away from receiving or giving love. Let us always walk together in love.

¹ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Press, 1988), p. 274.

² Janice W. Hearn, "Money-Changeers in the Church," *Preaching Great Texts*, Vol. III, p. 60.

³ Quoted by Budd MacKenzie, *Chamber Update*, "Just the Facts Ma'am," September 2006.

⁴ Linda Bales, "HIV and AIDS: Awakening the Church to Action!" *Pers-pec-tives: A Seasonal Newsletter of the United Methodist Office for the United Nations*, Vol. 17, Fall 2006, p. 3.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon Lafayette United Methodist Church, Lafayette, CA