

“Releasing Attachments”

Mark 10.17–31

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 15 October 2006

I just want to go on record as saying this it is a total setup to have the story of the Rich Young Man at the outset of stewardship season...but that isn’t going to stop me from preaching on this text, which I actually like...a lot. I like it because it’s a prickly little story that tweaks a lot of us where we are most sensitive, namely it involves wealth. Yet, I would say that wealth, per se, is not integral to what Jesus is talking about. (I’ll get back to that.)

One way of reading the story can be summarized in the four-word sentence, “Rich people are bad.” After all, Jesus tells us that it is easier for a rich person to get through the eye of a needle than it is for him and his stock portfolio to get into the kingdom of God. And Jesus also said that it was poor folk who were truly blessed¹, because those who have wealth now have already had their consolation. It’s really easy to point at someone who has more wealth than you do and say, “Hey, because my neighbor Eric got a whopping bonus and has a jillion stock options from his company, and he drives a Lexus, therefore he’s a bad person.” Now what a minute...that has nothing to do with what Jesus said; it probably has more to do with our own sense of envy.

I have to tell you that anybody with twelve or sixteen or twenty years of formal education in Jesus’ day was “rich.” Anybody who had a weight problem was rich. And if you had a career that enabled you to retire, you were rich. And if you had a house with a room for each child, you were rich. And if you had a pet you were rich. And if you could even conceptualize a vacation, you were rich. And if you have a second home in the mountains, just forget about how wealthy you are. So, in the words of the King James Version, “Physician, heal thyself!”²

We sometimes forget to read on in the story to consider Peter...whiny little Peter...who says, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” Don’t you feel like part of that sentence got erased by someone trying to make Peter look not quite so bad? The sentence feels like it should read, “Look, you so-called Messiah, we left everything for you, and now what do we have to show for it? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. We’ve got no wives to comfort us. We’ve got no fish to sell, let alone to eat. We’ve got no homes to keep us warm. So, why should we keep trudging along with this would-be ministry you’re trying to ignite?”

I’m afraid I don’t really like Jesus’ answer, which is that all of Peter’s sacrifices are merely a small investment that is going to pay enormous dividends eventually. *Is that why we’re supposed to be followers of Jesus, so that we will get repaid a hundredfold soon and in the next life? Are we followers of Jesus so that we get some kind of reward, or are we disciples because it is the right thing to do?* That seems really inconsistent with who Jesus is, because he is *not* the prophet of the quid pro quo, saying that if you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours.

And he isn’t just asking Peter and the other disciples to leave their meager wealth behind, or even their houses or their fields. He cuts to the root of who they are: they leave their family: their house, their brothers, sisters, parents, children.

So, do you still think the message is that rich people are bad? Are they any worse than the working poor of Jesus’ day who are unwilling to leave the things that comfort them: their families and their farms? I think what Jesus is telling the rich young

¹ Luke 6.

² Luke 4.23

yuppie...and his disciples...and us. That there is *nothing* that you can rely on to give you sustenance (not food, not careers, not cars, not 401(k)s, not stock portfolios, or a rental property) in the long run. The only thing that's going to support you in a real way is being part of the kingdom of God: having a life of faith that you can lean into and live into.

It's as if Jesus is saying, hey you can hold all kinds of good properties here on the Monopoly board, including Park Place and Madison Avenue with hotels galore, but nothing is going to keep you from losing the whole darned game. Instead of Monopoly, you need to be playing a whole different game. It's not a game you can buy from Milton Bradley. It's only available through your own engagement of faith. And while it won't cost you a dime to *buy* the game, playing the disciple game has the highest costs as well as the greatest joys.



At the center of the discipleship game is *agape*, self-giving love. There is no score-keeping in the discipleship game, because the kind of love Jesus asks of us – *agape* – is love that never counts the cost.

Last week, I read something interesting on a website from a California Buddhist congregation in California: “Buddhist teaching emphasizes not to love because Love is an attachment and becomes a cause of suffering...But Buddhism tells us to be compassionate to all beings. Most parents love their children and they are ready to sacrifice themselves when a danger threatens their children. Even if your child hates you, you try to protect him from a danger. Understanding the situation well, loving without attachment and not expecting any return is called *compassion* in Buddhism. It is different from personal love but very similar to unconditional Love.”³

Compassion is a central teaching both of the Buddha and of the Christ. But, the emptiness espoused by the Buddha seems very dry and cold in comparison with the Semitic juiciness of Jesus' *agape* or self-giving love.

But, I think we're onto something here: Buddhism talks about releasing ourselves from attachments to material objects. And in the reading from Mark's gospel this morning, Jesus asks the rich young man to release his attachments. While I am certain that Jesus was a very keen observer of people and what was going on inside them, it probably wasn't that difficult to “read” the rich young yuppie and what he was so desperately attached to. Jesus tells him that even though he's followed the checklist of right behaviors, he needs to be able to let go of his attachments.

We build false idols of our careers, our successes, our wonderful families, the images of ourselves we build up and perpetuate, the sense of security we have in Fidelity or Janus or Putnam or Merrill Lynch or Vanguard. Ultimately, these things are going to fade away. As Ecclesiastes said, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?”⁴

The rich young yuppie ultimately is unable to *just let go*...to stop clinging to “success,” to ego, to power, to influence, to status. And that's a perfectly human response. We want to have power, influence, status, and the rest. It's seductive.

So, what is it that burdens you? What do you grasp for or cling to? What do you need to let go of?

It very well may be that it has nothing whatever to do with wealth. Perhaps the idol you need to smash is the idea that your work matters more than anything else. Or that the vodka bottle is more important than even your family. Or that you are “set for life” because of your investment portfolio. Or that you are “owed” something by life. Or that you really

³ Koyasan.org

⁴ Ecclesiastes 1.2–4

aren't good enough to pursue that new career. Or that you don't have quite enough skills to get the new job.



Letting go as a concept has a lot to do with perceptions of security and vulnerability. The rich young yuppie has got what the world would define as "security." Perhaps you would describe him as "independently wealthy." And it's that sense of security that he is unwilling to relinquish.

We make ourselves vulnerable not simply by giving away our wealth, but in a thousand different ways: by sharing something of our true selves with those who share our journey, by giving of ourselves without counting the cost; by releasing ego attachment to a project or way of doing business; by letting go of an old way of seeing ourselves (whether it exaggerates or diminishes a true sense of who we are); by letting go of a destructive behavior; by letting go of the past; by letting go of playing the victim; by letting go of worry. For some of us, it is far more easier to let go of some cash than to let go of the idols that will continue to haunt us until we open ourselves, make ourselves vulnerable, and let them go.



One of the aspects of Buddhism that Christianity does not share is the idea that the physical world – everything around us – is an illusion that only reflects vague aspects of reality. And that is why we should release attachments to it.

Christianity, on the other hand, sees the reality and the goodness of the physical world – everything around us – and ask an even deeper level of commitment in loving the world, but not attaching too deeply to it, but rather attaching ourselves to *agape* – to self-giving love itself – and to the Creator who is the source of all things. And to put our trust...our faith...not in this world as it is, but in him who asks us to let go and follow him.



I'm going to end with a prayer written by Walter Brueggemann, probably the most esteemed Christian scholar of the Old Testament and an ordained UCC minister. It is entitled, "We Notice Your Giving."

You God of command who issues demands upon us;
 You God of promise who compels us to hope;
 You God of deliverance endlessly up-ending our systems of abuse;
 In all your commanding, your promising, your delivering,
 we notice your giving.
 Indeed your giving is what we notice first, best, and most,
 about your own life ...
 giving without reserve or limitation.
 You give us worlds of beauty and abundance,
 blessed and fruitful,
 You give us sustenance for the day,
 so that we are not smitten by the sun by day
 or by the moon by night.
 You give us – in the center of all your giving –
 your only, well-beloved Son.
 You give us your spirit of power, energy, and wisdom.
 Gifts all without grudging!

