

“Life or Death?”

Jeremiah 9:23-24; James 1:9-16;
Luke 18:18-27

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As he stood there talking with his father, his first reaction was to simply leave. He was livid. His anger was such that he could hardly contain it. He wanted to just get out of there and go. But he was too practical for that. He knew that if he left, he would be in the same state that his brother had been in before he came home. So he forced himself to work through his anger enough to hear what his father was asking and to think about how he could do what was asked of him, at least as far as the letter of what was being said. So he followed his father back inside. Of course, his father took him immediately to see his brother who he stiffly greeted, whispering to him, “Welcome home. Your father is glad you’re here.”

As the party continued, he managed to slip to the side and not participate any more than he absolutely had to. You might say that became his MO. He began to try to sideline himself in the work of the family. Finally, he began to talk to his father about how it really only took two of them to run the family business. He had an uncle in the town distant (back in that time it was 20 miles). He said, “He wants me to come help him out.” Finally his father relented and said, “Go.” The son asked for only one thing; just enough money to help him with the journey and to not be a burden on the uncle when he first got there until he could start working and pay his own way. And so he went.

While he was there, he was a shrewd fellow. He began to do pretty well. He helped his uncle out in the business he had there. He had developed a skill for getting ahead and as he worked, he started to acquire quite a few things. He became noticed in the town as somebody important, wealthy. He was offered a position in the town governance and became an official. He was pretty proud of what he had done. He had, he felt, honored his father by making something of himself. He still kept in contact, sent a note from time to time, and even went to visit a few times (short visits). He was feeling pretty good. He was wealthy, and he was powerful, and people were noticing who he was.

One day, one of those wandering rabbis was coming through town and he wanted to show off to a few of his friends how great he was. He thought he knew what the rabbi would ask, so he went and said, “Good rabbi, what would it take for me to have everlasting life?” This rabbi didn’t answer immediately quite the way he expected. The rabbi responded, “Why do you call me good? Only God is good.” What is this guy getting at? Then came the more expected response: “You know the commandments. Have you followed them?” “I have, since I was a young boy.” The rabbi looked at him and instead of saying, “Great! You’re an example to the community,” he said “There’s one thing you’re not quite there on yet. You need to sell all you have and come follow me.” He was stunned. “Why in the world would he say something like that to me? Blessings are the things we gain. They are all blessings. Throw away my blessings?” He walked away with a distaste in his mouth and began to wonder what he could have

for dinner that night that might get rid of it. He heard them saying something as he left, but he was done with that scene.

I again am putting things together from several parables, suggesting a possible reason for the rich young ruler coming to Jesus and asking a question. I wonder if Jesus, on the other side, saw him coming. I have this visual image of Jesus recognizing as he's coming that he's one of these guys that seems to have a megaphone all the time because he wants to be heard, whatever he says. So we might wonder what Jesus saw. Immediately, Jesus saw something when he began his question with "Good teacher, good rabbi..." Was he just trying to butter him up for what he wanted to hear back?

Jesus immediately began to challenge him. "Why do you call me good? What is this "good" thing about? Is God in there somewhere in what you're asking me, or is it all about you?" He didn't say all that, either. So he goes on and asks the question. Now anyone who can answer that question with that much assurance I think must be at least deceiving themselves. I don't know anybody who could hold up all those commandments all the time through all their life since they were a young person. Maybe you know somebody, but I sure don't. So right there, we see something going on. If nothing else, there is at least some self-deception and maybe some other kind of deception as well.

So what does Jesus see that he needs? He needs to let go. Let go of all that he has grabbed hold of to make his life what it has been and to follow Jesus. I think there are two components of his life that Jesus is getting at. One is letting go of the stuff, which we focus on a lot because we know we can get so focused on the stuff that we forget about God. But there is the second part of following Jesus, thinking about not only letting go of the stuff, but why. One reason is that it makes you powerful and important. He was a leader in the community. He was a ruler. And what did Jesus ask him to do? Follow. It's pretty hard to go from leader to follower. It's a request of humility. It's a request to change his life.

In some ways, the other scriptures we read are the same kind of request. What do you boast about? What is he boasting about? The suggestion is that he was boasting about how he thought he was pretty good, that he had made it and in the process of that lost track of God. Jeremiah says it this way: If you're going to boast about anything, boast about your God and see what God cares about, that your actions show steadfast love, justice, and righteousness. That's what delights God. James goes a little bit further. He says that really, what happens if you start to boast about who you are you are really on the path of sin that leads to death.

So we could say that the decision that Jesus was giving that young ruler that day was a life and death decision. I'm always amazed because I recognize that in what Jesus says, and yet Jesus asks the question and then lets him walk away. He doesn't go after him and say, "Don't you realize..." How much decision is given to that young man. How much decision is given to us?

It's interesting that as I was preparing this sermon, I heard a particular news story yesterday that was all about something called mirror neurons. How does this relate? It turns out that we have these structures in our brains called mirror neurons. They activate when we do things and they activate when somebody else does something. So there is a high probability that they are related to our ability to see what someone else is doing and make sense of it. It's that seeing what another person is doing that's important because one researcher suggests, then, that mirror neurons are the key to our ability to be empathetic, to see what another is doing, feeling, experiencing, and even project what they are going to do.

Why is that important? The news report was all about what happens to our mirror neurons when we begin to feel important and powerful. When we begin to feel more important, more powerful, our mirror neurons begin to shut down. Does that make any sense according to what Jesus is saying? It makes a ton of sense. You've got to let go of some of your stuff and your own importance to be able to see what God wants you to do and be, and that is to show steadfast love, justice, and righteousness, to care for one another, to love God and our neighbors.

So when Jesus requests the rich young ruler to let go of his stuff and come follow him, he is asking him to let go of his importance, his power. The news report went on to say that it is a pretty well-documented thing that people who are more powerful tend to be less empathetic, and maybe this is one reason. However, there's also research that shows that we can learn to be empathetic, to care for the other. Jesus seemed to say this 2,000 years ago. Not only has he said it, he invites us to follow him and to realize that the only real power, the only real goodness is in God and that whatever we have is partial. Which opens us up to love one another even as he has loved us. Amen.

Lord, as I think about your call to let go and to follow you and how that leads to doing what God delights in, and I recognize also how much of a struggle it is. I've seen it in myself. Lord, continue to work within us. Help us recognize that you are the one who is great and powerful and good, and that we get to follow you. We get to continue to share the grace you've given us, the very love of God. Thank you, Lord. Amen.