

Mark 10:17-27

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

October 10, 2021

What Must I Do?

I want to take a minute before I begin and say it is really good to be here. It is good to be with you all here in-person and knowing that we are continuing to worship with an extended community of those joining us online. Hello to the at home folks too (wave). It's been a season, hasn't it?

I know that earlier this year as vaccinations became available and COVID rates began to decline, we all had hope that everything would be back to whatever new normal would be. And then as the Delta variant hit, I imagine that we all sighed a collective "nooooo..." As we continue to endure, I'm grateful for this church and its Session and the ways in which we have aimed to keep each other safe while also seeking to safely connect. And so being here together again, it feels really good.

I also love that we've started in October. Fall is my favorite season and I think it's right that we are beginning again in a season where things are starting to release and let go. A mix of sunshine and a little crisp in the air. I grew up in the mountains of Utah where right now all the leaves are brilliant oranges and reds and yellows. It looks glorious and brings that fall glow everywhere you look. But I also know that in a few weeks, those leaves will release and let go, fall in piles and soon return back to the earth. Nature has a beautiful way of showing us how graceful it can be to let things go so that new things can arrive, even from the same tree.

There's a song by singer songwriter Carrie Newcomer where the chorus says: "Leaves don't drop, they just let go, and make a place for seeds to grow. Every season brings a change, a seed is what a tree contains, to die and live is life's refrain." And so the question that comes up again and again as we journey in faith together is "So then how are we to live?"

In our gospel reading today, we hear a response to that question. And before I delve into it, I want to name that this is a difficult text for many of us to read. Not because it's gruesome and *usually* not because it triggers some messed up teaching about faith we received in a lifetime prior. We get uncomfortable with this text because we want to make excuses for it and deflect it from our own realities. Jesus doesn't really mean go and sell ALL your stuff and give it all to the poor to follow him, right? And when he says it's hard for those with wealth to enter into the kingdom of heaven, I don't know about you, but I'm calculating my own literal wealth. No one would call *me* wealthy. *So and so* is wealthy...but *I'm* not. So this doesn't apply to me...right?

Our stewardship season begins next Sunday, and I'm sure the Stewardship committee would love it if I would stand here and just preach, "Hey, give all your money to Stone Church, y'all. It's what Jesus tells us to do." ☺

But seriously, if you read this from a position of wealth and privilege, it's a difficult text to hear. And honestly? It should be.

Because more of us than not, I think, can identify with this man who comes to Jesus...who RUNS to Jesus and kneels before him and asks the very honest question, "What must I do? What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

What must I do to fill this hole in my heart?

What must I do to feel fulfilled in my relationships?

What must I do to not hurt anymore?

What must I do to gain favor with God?

What must I do to fully gain the security that I desire?

What must I do?

He's a doer, this guy. And something in his life is still missing for him that he makes sure to run to this man Jesus before he leaves town. We know he's a doer because when Jesus reminds him of the basics-those commandments they've recited and known since their youth, he tells Jesus that he's followed those rules and obeyed them his whole life.

And then one of my favorite verses in scripture that give us insight into who Christ is happens right here. The next verse says, "Jesus, looking at him, loved him..." Jesus, looking at him, loved him. I love this. Because I need to take a second here to say that rarely in the gospels do we get a glimpse into Jesus' own personal feelings about people or about anything. His private thoughts are usually private, and so generally we let his actions and words simply be what they are. But here we get this rare glimpse and knowledge that whatever words or actions follow, Jesus is saying and doing it from a place of loving this person, no ifs, ands or buts.

And so, if we read it that way, with love being the first thing, the message here cannot be "Jesus loved him, but...he was wealthy and that was a problem that needed to be solved for this relationship to go any further." Instead, if we believe that Jesus loved him unconditionally first, then we can understand what he says next to reflect the fact that what Jesus wants for him is for that guy's own sake. Not, like, "be poor because I only like poor people," but instead something like, "your

wealth is problematic for you, and because I love you, I wish for your thriving. Here is what is standing in your way..."

And Jesus promises this man a different kind of wealth. The one that he knows this man is seeking and desiring to make him whole. Release from the things that are holding him down or holding him back from a new and radical journey of faith. The ability to give and share with those whose lives could change completely upon receiving those gifts. Treasures in heaven. A new path and adventure to follow alongside Jesus the Christ.

This response is clearly not what this man wanted to hear. He also clearly had expectations of what he thought the response would be. And so scripture tells us that he's shocked by Jesus' response and does not even sit with it. He walks away grieving.

What must I do?

In this anonymous man's case, he cannot let go and do the thing that will give him life abundant.

Then Jesus looks around and says, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God."

Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber expands on this and continues, *"How hard it is for us who are self-reliant and smug to accept how utterly dependent we are on God. How hard it is for those of us who don't actually need God to see God. How hard it is for us for whom comfort (material, financial and physical) insulates us from the daily bread reality of our Creator. How hard it is for those of us who dedicate ourselves to being good social justice activists to surrender to a God who is likely unimpressed with our busyness. How hard it is for the powerful to see life abundant in giving away power. How hard it is to die and be re-born."*

Friends, this call to follow Christ, to journey with him and with a bunch of imperfect followers is hard.

Notice that Jesus did not take this as an opportunity to use this man's resources and his eagerness to capitalize on himself. He also did not throw him a softball in terms of what it is he needed to do. Jesus does not run after him and then makes it palatable for him or give him a strategy to ease into. Jesus knew exactly what he needed to let go to have life and to have it abundantly. He knew what it was that this person was seeking. And so from a place of love, he tells him like it is, and then gives him the freedom to choose.

You see, going back to the analogy of autumn leaves, trees lose their leaves so they're not weighed down in the season to come ... and so today, I want to ask us to think about what it is that we might be asked to release and let go as we enter into this new season of being the church together in a way that honors the former, the current realities, and the things to come? What from our own lives, if released, might bring new life to others, even as new treasures are poured into our own lives in a completely different way? What do we need to release, to let go, to be free and unburdened by so that we can be well and whole? Because this text is telling us that whatever that thing is, it's not going to feel easy or be easy. We are going to feel disappointed by the answer. And quite frankly, even if we get an answer, we might just not want to do it.

What must I do?

The final verses of that Carrie Newcomer song says, "I've traveled through my history from certainty to mystery. God speaks in rhyme, in paradox. This I know is true. And finally when life is through, I am what I am, not what I do. It comes down to you and your next breath, and this I know is true. Leaves don't drop, they just let go, and make a place for seeds to grow. Every season brings a change, a seed is what a tree contains, to die and live is life's refrain."

Sisters and brothers and siblings in Christ, whatever you take from this message today, I want you to know and remember that Christ also looks at you, LOVES YOU-it is present tense, it is always ... Christ loves you and wants you to live a life of abundance and liberation. Our Creator wants the kind of abundance for you that does not come by more stuff, or more doing, but first by the knowledge that you are the beautifully created one-the reflection and light of the holy. That stripped of everything, you are still loved and still have an abundance that can only be seen and fully known in the way the kingdom of God works-where the last shall be first and the first shall be last.

And so, what must I do? What must we do?

Well, the choice is up to you.

Lord, teach us to count our days so that we may gain a wise heart. May it be so.

Amen.