



Go

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church
October 14, 2018; Mark 10:17-31*

So I left the church and organized religion for a long time, and at one point fairly soon after my return, I was considering joining an intentional Episcopal community. I loved the sense of sacred time in the Episcopal Church -- the liturgical year, and the rhythms of praying the daily office -- so much that I nearly joined a community who had a rule of life oriented around sacred time. But when I dug a little deeper into this possibility I discovered that members of the particular community I was exploring took the traditional vows of Christian monastic life: the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. To which my initial response was: no, no, and no.

Most of us don't mind giving to the church. We are even willing to make a generous pledge to the church during pledge season, which this is. But to give everything that we have, like Jesus asked the man in today's gospel text to do? To take vows of poverty, like the people in the intentional community I was looking at? That's something else entirely. But the truth is that throughout the vast breadth and depth of Christian spirituality over time, there have been people who have embraced voluntary poverty as a core part of their identity in following the way of Jesus. It comes in great part from this story that we just read from Mark's gospel. From the earliest desert fathers and mothers in the caves of Egypt to St Francis of Assisi to Mother Theresa, giants in the Christian tradition have taken Jesus' invitation literally and embraced poverty. They've made a radical witness to the power of

freedom and unconditional love and solidarity with the poor. But what about ordinary folks like you and me? Where do we fit? Whether we are rich or ordinary or poor, what are we to make of Jesus' invitation to this man – to sell everything he owns, give the proceeds to the poor, and then come to follow Jesus? What about little Isabelle, who is being baptized today, who is being initiated into the Way of Jesus?

The classic interpretation of this story is that when you have too much wealth you become less aware of your need for God – riches distract and numb us from our vulnerability and some think they make it harder to have the right priorities. Perhaps those perspectives have some merit. But when I look at this story I see something else.

This man came asking for eternal life. That is a phrase most of us don't think about very often, and in our culture most of us have been raised to think of "eternal life" as meaning only the afterlife, heaven. But eternity, by definition, has no beginning or end. This man was on the right track. He knew for all his ethics he was lacking something. In the book of Hebrews in the Bible there is a passage that talks about Jesus being a priest, not because of his lineage or human institution or privilege, but because he had the power of an indestructible life. Now let's not romanticize this. Jesus died a terrible death. But here we are two thousand years later, a strong community still living into his way. Jesus' legacy, and his Spirit and very presence, are still with us, after all this time. This indestructible life was powerful in the time of Jesus, and it is powerful now. It counters the narratives of death and despair in our culture. This is a life that gives us hope and strength and that cannot be defeated by violence or hatred, and it is worth everything that we are and have. It is the life we, and little Isabelle today, are initiated into in baptism. And Jesus is inviting the man in the gospel text to experience this, and this story has invited everyone who reads it since to do the same thing.

Jesus says to this man, “Come and follow me.” That’s an open-ended invitation. It’s not a project or a pilgrimage with a start and end date, like walking the Camino or going to Iona. Jesus is inviting this man to simplify, to do what he needs to do to become free to be flexible and open to change, free to change the trajectory of his life, free to go places he can’t anticipate or plan, for the sake of following the way of Jesus.

There was a pastor in Mississippi in the 1960s named John Perkins. He was African American, and one day he was arrested without provocation and beaten terribly by white police officers. It took him months to recover in the hospital. During his recovery time he sensed a call from God to become a missionary to white people, to the people who had abused him so badly. The power of Jesus’ indestructible life was not only healing him, but giving him a vision that no one would have predicted. He developed what has since come to be called Christian Community Development, which is a way Christians of all races can work together toward justice and to end poverty. This movement was founded on what Rev. Perkins called the three R’s: Relocation, Reconciliation, and Redistribution. Relocation is where it started, and for him it meant that followers of the way of Jesus are called to go where the pain in the world is. They are called to relocate, to find some way to get outside their comfort zones, to encounter people they would not normally encounter. Rev. Perkins didn’t mean we all need to literally move to the inner city or to the poorest slums of India or to Rosebud reservation in South Dakota. He meant that we are called, every day, to be free enough to follow Jesus to where people are in pain, and to be willing to stay there long enough for that pain to become our own. To be able to empathize with people with very different life experiences. Only then can we be humble and wise enough to know what God calls us to do about that pain.

I told you last week that our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has created what he calls the “Way of Love,”¹ which is seven spiritual practices that capture the way of Jesus for Episcopalians. These are the seven spiritual practices that give us the roadmap of Christian faith, the faith that begins with baptism. One of those practices is simply “Go” – which means, “Cross boundaries. Listen deeply. Live like Jesus.” That “Go” reminds me of Rev. Perkins’ “relocate” – to be caught up into the current of God’s Spirit to places you wouldn’t have predicted. It’s about Jesus’ invitation to the rich man in today’s Gospel story to be free enough to follow him.

Since God called Abram and Sarai to leave everything they knew and go to a place God would show them, the spiritual journey has always meant leaving the familiar safety net behind, and going places where there is no map, there is no instruction booklet, no way to predict what will happen, but to go there because God is already there ahead of us. Jesus is not only found in church. In fact I’d say Jesus is already mostly out there, loving and reconciling and creating the overflowing life of the kingdom of God, and we are called to become free enough to follow him and participate in what he is doing. Following Jesus has always meant going to uncomfortable places, like hanging out with hookers and tax collectors sinners and lepers and outcasts of every kind, because God cares about them and wants healing and life and hope for them and for us. So God calls us to “Go” to them--to cross boundaries, listen deeply, live like Jesus.

When I was in seminary I was already a trained spiritual director, and I ended up spending weekly time at Youthlink, which is a day service center for homeless young adults in Minneapolis. I volunteered there every week for three years, and my role was just to listen to them. At first it was so awkward.

¹ See “Explore the Way of Love: Practices for a Jesus-Centered Life,” in The Episcopal Church website, <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/explore-way-love>.

I didn't know how to connect and didn't think these homeless young adults would want to connect with me. After a few months I talked to my supervisor about it and told her how much I felt I didn't fit in, I had nothing to offer – I was a middle class middle aged white woman, trying to listen deeply to young men of color who were homeless and wore their jeans around their thighs. You know what my supervisor told me? She said, "I'm not going to take your pain away from you. Now maybe you understand, in a tiny, temporary way, what they go through every day of their lives." Their pain and my pain connected. And after that things changed. I had to let go of the idea that I and they were so different that we couldn't connect. Then I could really listen to them.

The Way of Jesus is not a hobby or a good idea. It's an embodied reality that claims everything that we are and have. It's about a hope that defies the narratives of death and violence and falsehood in our culture and politics. It's about the power of an indestructible life that can never be possessed, but has to flow through us. In the kingdom of God we do have eternal life, the sacred future that God is always bringing about in and through us, but it's a life and a future we can never own. Jesus calls us to Go, listen deeply, live like Jesus. And like the rich man in the story today, we are also called to figure out what gets in the way of following Jesus, and let go of it, so that we can truly be free.