

“God’s Hardest Miracle”

This morning I want to begin with an old joke because it gives us a unique perspective on today’s text. Now I’m pretty bad when it comes to telling jokes so just bear with me. One Sunday morning, a mother was pounding on the bedroom door. “It’s time to get up and go to church,” she called. “I’m not going,” came the voice from inside. “Why not,” demanded the mother. “They don’t like me,” came the voice from inside the door. “But you have to go,” said the mother. “Why?” came the sad voice. “Because,” said the mother, “You are 59 years old-- and you are the pastor!”¹

Normally we see Jesus knocking on people’s doors, but in today’s text, a rich man comes knocking on Jesus’s door. Intercepting Jesus and his disciples as they were setting out on a journey the rich man addresses Jesus as, “Good/Perfect Teacher”, and asks Jesus what he had to *do* to inherit eternal life.

He’s done everything that his religious tradition expects of him. He’s obeyed the commandments (you shall not murder; shall commit adultery; shall not steal; shall not bear false witness; shall not defraud; honor your mother and father) since his youth and still he doesn’t know if he’s done enough. After saying this Jesus in vs.21 looks at the rich man and it says that **Jesus loved him**. Seeing him clear through to his heart, Jesus does not rebuke or discipline him, but loves him. It is more than admiration or respect or sentimentality. It is the gut-wrenching concern one has for a loved one about to take their own life. All that is important in a moment like that is to save them and help them discover a reason to live. And Jesus tries to save him by giving him the answer. The answer comes as more than a

¹ Adapted from Prof. Dr. President Emeritus David Zersen’s , *When Jesus Pounds at Your Door*

“God’s Hardest Miracle”

suggestion. Jesus says, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come follow me.” But this specific answer troubles the man because he is very rich. Jesus here is now effectively pounding on the man’s door. He’s reminding him that he is a religious person and that discipleship involves more than obeying some rules. It requires setting aside one’s personal interests and treasures and stepping faithfully into the unknown. It demands thinking less of one’s own personal need and focusing on the needs of others.

It means that whole-hearted discipleship cannot take place until the ties to the man’s possessions are severed, ties so intense and so enslaving that he can only walk away grieving.

This is what caused the rise of Monasticism in the 3rd – 5th centuries. People were becoming monks, selling and giving away all their possessions.

We know, for example, that Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens’ *The Christmas Carol* seemed to be the epitome of greed in that he had no considerations for people in general and specifically for his employee on Christmas Eve. However, by the end of the story, after the author allows a number of “visitations” to “pound on his door,” Scrooge makes an about-face and becomes a generous man. So, who was Scrooge really?

In another more recent example, the 2014 case of Ethan Couch raises a complicated question. Under the influence of alcohol and drugs, Couch had slammed with his speeding vehicle into people who were assisting a driver with a disabled SUV. Four people were killed and others were injured. At the trial, Couch

“God’s Hardest Miracle”

was given a mild sentence because a psychologist for the defense said that he had “Affluenza,” a disorder caused by the belief that wealth provides privilege. Although Crouch was released from confinement in April of this year, it is interesting to ask what he thought when he walked away monitored by his ankle bracelet. Was he just a self-centered and greedy person who cared more about things than about people, or was there more to him than this episode in his life demonstrated? If Jesus were to pound on the door of his life, what kind of response might Jesus expect?

It is a question that is compelling for each of us. We are not the man in our text nor are we Ethan Crouch. We have been shaped and formed by an environment that includes parental training, personal experience and religious nurture. What we allow ourselves to think or say when Jesus pounds on our door is one of the intriguing questions being addressed to each of us. Other questions may make us wonder what stands in the way of following Jesus more resolutely? We may in fact be faithful stewards of many things, but does our commitment to those things prevent us from being truly whole as a human being and as a follower of Jesus? We all know people who find such questions irrelevant because they have found other priorities that support their self-interests. What is the question that we deeply want to ask about ourselves?

How is it with us? Do we think of ourselves as little Christs who at least care as much for the needs of others as for own? Or are we troubled to fit Jesus’ lifestyle into our own as we work at being successful and content? We often find ourselves somewhere in between. Let’s remember the man in our text who tried to be a good person, but who really felt that he was missing something. And what did Jesus say

“God’s Hardest Miracle”

he was missing? And what did the man do when Jesus told him what he was missing? Are we listening?

First of all, when Jesus discovered that the man was on a serious quest, that he really wanted to discover what Jesus just a few verses earlier than those in our current text called “the abundant life,” he loved him. He loved him just as he loves us when with all our hearts we truly seek him. (Jer. 29:13). Secondly, however, he helps us with the second step. He encourages us to take that leap of faith which involves looking away from ourselves to the needs of others. And he doesn’t just tell us. He shows the way. He says, “Follow me.” In Nikos Kazantzakis’ great novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, while on the cross, tempted to save himself and have a happy life on earth, he surrenders himself for others and says, “It is finished.” What we are called to appreciate is that we have been embraced by such a powerful love that we can allow it to radiate through us to those around us.

The real question that our text puts to us is not what happened to the man on a quest for eternal life. We don’t know what happened to him after he walked away. He may have given up trying to be perfect because his self-centeredness had made it a useless quest. He may have ended up in the crowd that was at the foot of the cross. Perhaps he was at Pentecost waiting for his new life to begin. Maybe he became an unsung evangelist. We will never know.

What we can know, however, is that the story’s unresolved ending invites us to consider a new way of discipleship for each of us. There is no need just to walk away when the pounding on the door becomes louder. The person who invites us to

“God’s Hardest Miracle”

follow him in loving others has loved us first. And today there is a knock that it may be hard to ignore.

Can you hear it?