

Belonging to Christ #1: “You Belong”

Mark 10:17-31

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Jesus invites us to leave behind things that keep us entangled so that we might follow him and discover the meaning and freedom of life with God.

He just wanted to belong.

How many times have we said those words? Maybe we have looked at people we've known who have tried, and tried, and tried to fit in—but despite their best efforts, or maybe because of what they've done, they just don't seem to belong. Or maybe you have said them about yourself: you worked hard, tried to make the right decisions, tried really, really hard to meet the right people and do all the things society says you should do to fit in—but somehow it doesn't quite work.

For some people, belonging never seems to be a struggle. They acclimate well to new surroundings, and like a fish taking to water, just start swimming. I think of my little friend Jo-Jo that I spoke about earlier. He has a golden personality. He is outgoing and inquisitive. I doubt he will rarely have difficulty feeling comfortable in new circumstances, even if he never quite fits in.

I think of my son, Dean. When he was younger people sometimes called him the mayor of Woodlawn Chapel. Dean had a hard time learning to speak, however. His sisters now refer to those years as the “golden years.” But once he started receiving speech he took off. One day in preschool, he made a friend. The young boy was medically fragile, and faced a lot of difficulties. He was in a wheelchair, unable to do many of the things that the others could do. This boy had been absent for many weeks because of an illness, and when he returned, Dean's eyes opened wide. The other kids were unsure of how to interact with the little guy, but Dean ran up to him and said, “Hey, guys! It's our friend! He's back!”

Belonging is much more than merely fitting in. Author Brene Brown has said that ““True belonging is not passive. It's not the belonging that comes with just joining a group. It's not fitting in or pretending or selling out because it's safer. It's a practice that requires us

to be vulnerable, get uncomfortable, and learn how to be present with people without sacrificing who we are. We want true belonging, but it takes tremendous courage to knowingly walk into hard moments.”

It seems that the man in Mark yearned for true belonging. Mark, Matthew and Luke each include a version of this story. Sometimes we call it the story of the rich young ruler, though scripture never gives us a clue about his age. Luke adds the part about him being a ruler and also says “he was very rich.” Matthew and Mark do not say anything about his age. They also don’t tell us how much money he had in the bank, but only say he had “great possessions.”

We want to make this into a story about how hard it is for rich people to get into heaven, but the truth is his possessions were not a problem. His problem was his attachment to them.

When I was in college, the chair of the journalism department heard that I was going to be going to seminary instead of heading off to the world of journalism. She called me into her office and we had a nice chat. But she warned me: “If you become a minister, don’t become a minister who only talks about money!” She was quite clear. “I go to church now and then. I am actually a Presbyterian as well. And if I like the sermon, I put in a dollar or two. (I tried to resist making a comment about the new Cadillacs she always drove!). But if the minister starts talking about money, I get up and leave.”

Point taken.

The truth is we are uncomfortable talking about money in church, and that is one reason this story troubles us. Jesus’ words sound harsh. Couldn’t it have ended with the man telling Jesus he has kept the commandments? Couldn’t the church be content with a person of faith who has lived a decent, moral life? Couldn’t Mark have ended this story with, “Jesus, looking at him, loved him?” We want to experience Jesus’ loving gaze, but we also know that even the poorest of us have more possessions than the man in this story.

So sometimes we try to smooth the rough edges of this passage by suggesting that perhaps the man really did not keep the law as he had professed. All Jesus was doing, some say, was calling his bluff. Or we might say that Jesus’ words meant for him alone—that Jesus really does not have a concern with how wealthy a person is. Or, in some cases,

we might say well, since everyone can think of someone who is either richer or poorer than us, all we can do is trust Jesus. So, as one commentator says, off to the mall we go.

It's a problem. I hear Jesus' words and wonder, "Would I be able to give up all the things that I enjoy, all the possessions I have gathered?" My children often look around at our house and my books and say, "Well, you could give it a try!"

If we try to blunt the impact of this story, we are left with something other than what Jesus intended. Jesus, it seems, is not in a mood to negotiate. That does not mean that Jesus condemns the wealthy. In fact, the gospel includes many instances of wealthy persons offering their gifts in service to God. It means, however, that no matter how little or much we own, if we do not open our heart to God, these possessions own us.

But listen to the man's question: "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" What must I do to know that I belong to God? The issue says Andre Resner, is the man yearns for eternal life but he can't take his eyes off the here and now. He wants to belong, but at what cost?

He had many possessions, yet the one thing he really wanted he could not figure out how to buy. And, what scares us is the knowledge that we all have possessions.

Mark's gospel refracts everything through the lens of the cross. Jesus is calling disciples to follow him on the way. He is, in fact, on the way right now, headed to Jerusalem. Jesus knows this man is earnest, and is perhaps ready to discover what it means to truly belong. Jesus looks at the man, and lovingly invites him to follow as he offers what he owns to the poor.

There's no clear ending to this story. Did the man keep living the way he had been? Did he walk away sad, because he knew he could not sell all that he owned? Or did he walk away sad in the knowledge that the new life Jesus was offering would indeed cost him so very much?

He walks away, only to hear Jesus tell this absurd little story about it being easier for two-thousand-point camel to squeeze through the eye of a tiny needle than it is for a wealthy person to enter the kingdom of God.

Now it's the disciples' turn to be shocked. They have left everything. They have put it all on the line to follow Jesus. If a wealthy person, the one who was the essence of success, could not enter the kingdom, then who can be saved?

That is the point, says Jesus. To belong to the kingdom is to know the power of God's grace. After all, "for God all things are possible."

To follow Jesus is to belong and to know you belong. It is a commitment that spills over into all parts of our lives. There is no passive way of following Christ. Instead, we discover we belong, and find our heart's deepest meaning, as we are willing to share all that we have. *Amen.*