

The Great Reversal

Mark 10.17-27, 31 (The Message)

Luke 15.20-32 (The Message)

September 25, 2011

The voice of the Nazarene still beckons. It is not in believing, but in following, that his identity is revealed.

- Robin R. Meyers (adapted)

“Come, follow me.”

- Jesus of Nazareth

As he went out into the street, a man came running up, greeted him with great reverence, and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to get eternal life?" Jesus said, "Why are you calling me good? No one is good, only God. You know the commandments: Don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't lie, don't cheat, honor your father and mother." He said, "Teacher, I have—from my youth—kept them all!" Jesus looked him hard in the eye—and loved him! He said, "There's one thing left: Go sell whatever you own and give it to the poor. All your wealth will then be heavenly wealth. And come follow me." The man's face clouded over. This was the last thing he expected to hear, and he walked off with a heavy heart. He was holding on tight to a lot of things, and not about to let go. Looking at his disciples, Jesus said, "Do you have any idea how difficult it is for people who 'have it all' to enter God's kingdom?" The disciples couldn't believe what they were hearing, but Jesus kept on: "You can't imagine how difficult. I'd say it's easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for the rich to get into God's kingdom." That set the disciples back on their heels. "Then who has any chance at all?" they asked. Jesus was blunt: "No chance at all if you think you can pull it off by yourself. Every chance in the world if you let God do it. This is once again the Great Reversal: Many who are first will end up last, and the last first."

Inside Out and Outside In

Jesus speaks in this passage of a great reversal; whatever that is. It seems to mean something like overturning the applecart, turning expectations on their heads, defying assumptions and the like. If so, this is not the only place Jesus speaks of such a reversal. There is something of a

*“Bo” James R. Crowe
Overland Park Christian Church*

great reversal in the parable of the prodigal son; the older brother is for all intents and purposes the hero of the story until the very end when everything turns all catawampus. The one who has been faithful and loyal finds himself on the outside looking in. The encounter between Jesus and the man narrated in Mark 10 contains a great reversal as well. The man comes into this encounter feeling ever so proud; smugly satisfied with his exemplary religious and moral life. He, too, finds himself on the outside looking in when Jesus challenges the basis of his pride and pronounces a death knell on his smugness, "You lack one thing."

The great reversal works in the other direction as well. That is to say, those on the outside looking in – like the prodigal son – find themselves the beneficiaries of grace and looking at the world from within God's loving embrace, within God's favor. Those who have looked on life from afar – the poor, diseased, rejected, downtrodden, and marginalized – and have been kept at a safe distance by the smug elite, are granted free access to God, to life, to love.

This is once again the great reversal, Jesus pronounces, as much a promise as a warning. It could be worth our while to explore this surprising notion a bit this morning, with a view to discover what makes the difference between first and last, outside and in. Why do the first become last and the last first? I propose we use the stories of the prodigal's older brother and the man in Mark 10 as guides in this exploration.

You Lack One Thing

Among the throngs who followed on the heels of Jesus seeking his wisdom, his favor, or his downfall, could be counted many of the religious faithful of the day. There were Pharisees, for example, who found much to agree with in the teaching of Jesus, yet who recoiled in horror to see Jesus associate openly and joyfully with the outcast and impure. There were Scribes who meditated on Torah day and night, carefully parsing its demands on their time and resources, and diligently striving to fulfill these demands. There were the cultural elite, such as the man whose story we shared moments ago, who were themselves faithful to the demands of the life of faith. "All these things," he responded to Jesus - all the requirements of Torah - "I have kept since my youth." Finally, although he lives his life in a story, the prodigal's older brother could easily be cited here, for he represents a shining example of Jewish piety and morality at the time of Jesus.

Many of us might look with approval on the religious efforts of such men; especially on their zeal for moral purity. They were good men all, men of spirit who strove not only to be moral and upstanding, but as well to improve their community and preserve their faith for the generations to come.

Many of us might look with approval on the religious efforts of such men, again, because they struggled to practice and preserve their faith under difficult circumstances. Exotic new religious ideas were arriving almost daily from the distant reaches of the Roman Empire, ideas that swirled seductively through the minds and spirits of their youth. And they lived, let's not forget, under the tutelage of Rome; they practiced their faith under Roman protection, but Rome's protection was tenuous and fickle, and could be revoked on a whim. Under such circumstances, we might conclude, they can be excused for drawing a narrow circle around their faith; pushing away those who lived on its margins and embarrassed or compromised their position with Rome: religious freethinkers like Jesus, the racially mixed, the poor, the diseased, the morally compromised. Under such circumstances, they can be excused for detailing the requirements of the religious life; for creating a tangible rule, as it were, against which to measure the worthiness of any and all in the eyes of humankind and of God.

Many of us might look with approval on the religious efforts of such men, but Jesus looked on them and wept, for he seems to have measured by a different standard. When he looked on them he didn't see men of high moral achievement who stood tall in their communities; rather, he saw self-righteous men who drew narrow circles that excluded others from fellowship; indeed, excluded the majority of the people God wants to embrace. These men did not understand the truth behind a poetic verse that would be written only centuries later by Edwin Markham, a verse inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus, "He drew a circle that shut me out - heretic, rebel, a thing to flout. But Love and I had the wit to win and we drew a circle that took him in!"

Again, Jesus didn't see men who had made significant strides toward God; but men whose religious efforts exiled them from God, men whose religious and moral smugness blinded them to the fact that the grace of God that alone brings reconciliation and healing is always and exclusively a gift. They were close, Jesus saw, ever so close to the Kingdom of God, yet so very far away. It's ironic, is it not, that Jesus looked on faithful Jews who lived some six hundred years after the Babylonian captivity and saw exiles, estranged from God and from each other? It's ironic that Jesus

looked on individuals of high moral achievement and a long track record of religious involvement and could only say, "You lack one thing."

The Lesson of Love

You lack one thing. But what could be lacking in men of such strong moral fiber, such wisdom and religious accomplishment? Indeed, what could be lacking in the prodigal's older brother who is so like such men and who, after years of obedience and faithful service, finds himself standing alone, angry and afraid; looking in on the celebration of grace?

Many have posed this question concerning the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. Many, in fact, downright disagree with the way Jesus treats this young man in his parable. He seems so much the hero of the story until its very end. He stays at home to care for his aging father and to see to the interests of the family business. He never dreams of squandering hard-earned money on prostitutes and wild living. He is loyal through thick and thin, a paragon of moral virtue, the son of which every mother dreams.

Is it any wonder that the older brother is absolutely livid when he comes home from yet another endless day working in the fields, only to learn that his father has welcomed his worthless brother home with open arms; that he has chosen to forget about the shame he has brought on the family name, the waste of their property, and the burden he left for his older brother? Is it any wonder that he confronts his father and demands in so many words, "Is this how all my efforts are rewarded?"

Whatever we may think about the virtue of the older brother or the validity of his complaint against his father, it remains that Jesus does not view him as the hero of this story. He seems, in fact, to look on him with the same loving concern bestowed on the man in Mark 10 and to respond to him with the same words, "You lack one thing."

In the eyes of Jesus, the heroism of the older brother begins to unravel when he demands of his father that which his efforts deserve; for this attitude makes it clear that he expects his father's love as a reward for his loyalty, obedience, and moral virtue. Indeed, this attitude reveals the one thing that he lacks, the one thing lacked by all those who measure their progress toward God in moral and religious terms. He has not learned the simple yet definitive lesson of love; it can never be earned, it can never be demanded, but always and only received as a gift.

Please don't miss the subtlety of Jesus' point. All the moral qualities exhibited by the older brother are admirable; they are a part of the spiritual journey on which we have embarked. Each of us, in fact, should strive toward them, for they can take us far in life. They can take us far in life and they are enough, Jesus says, if we want only to draw close to the kingdom, close to God's presence. If, however, we want to taste the spiritual life of which Jesus spoke, life which is so much more than mere morality, and if we want to experience the healing and joy of God's presence; then we must give up any pretense of working for, deserving, demanding or otherwise marking our progress toward God and receive God's gracious presence as a gift.

Simply Follow

There's another way to name what was lacking in these exemplary men: Pharisees, Scribes, the pious man in Mark 10, the older brother. They lacked the humility simply to follow Jesus; to enter the tent of feasting, to take that first stumbling step in faith, to trust him by doing as he did. Smugness and self-satisfaction tend to underscore the presumption of wisdom and sufficient knowledge. These men knew, or thought they knew, everything there is to know about God and the life of faith. Of their hard yet courageous decision to discriminate against the poor and needy, to push them to the fringe of society, they could only say, "It's what God demands." And because of this – because they knew so much about God - they stood on the outside looking in. They needed perhaps to focus less on their superior understanding that stood between them and God and to do one thing; simply follow.

Simply follow. This is the message of Jesus. Jesus never taught what to believe about God, but only to follow him. If you want to see God, he said, look at me. If you want to know God, he said, follow me. Simply follow. This is the recurring invitation Jesus holds out to all; to the learned and pious man in Mark 10 who lacked the humility to follow; to the older brother who stood outside the celebration of grace, stubborn and undecided; and to us as well. One way or another, we will all be a part of the great reversal.