

I Have Decided to Follow Jesus Sermon Series
“Though None Go with Me”
Luke 18:18-30
Rev. Joy Laughridge
July 10, 2022

One of the highlights of my week this week was worship planning and practice with Thomas and Vanessa on Thursday morning. We wanted to include our children and youth in worship and give them the chance to help lead us because we aren't having Sunday school this summer, but also because it reminds all of us that they are part of this church family and their presence, and their gifts and contributions are important. Jesus also made the point that adults have a lot to learn from children, and, in fact, in Luke, that's exactly what he had just finished saying when the rich man asked how he could inherit eternal life. “Truly I tell you,” he said, “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

You get the idea that the rich man saw these people bringing children and even tiny babies to Jesus, and he heard what Jesus said, but he didn't make the connection with himself. He didn't realize that Jesus had just answered the question that he was about to ask, so when the rich man asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life,” Jesus accommodated him and met him where he was. This man's language was money and wealth so Jesus put it to him in terms he could understand.

First Jesus told him that he needed to obey the law, and he cited 5 of the 10 commandments. The man thought he had it made because he had obeyed the commandments. He was a good person, but he had confused being a good person with being fully surrendered to Jesus and there is a difference. Knowing that the man wasn't getting the whole picture, Jesus pushed him further like the detective Columbo used to do when he knew people weren't telling him the whole story. He would ask a suspect questions and then make as if he had all he needed and start on his way. Just when the suspect was feeling relieved and like he might have gotten away with it, Columbo would come back and say, “oh, there's just one more thing...” and ask another pointed question when they weren't ready for it. So, just when the rich man thought he had done everything he needed to do to gain eternal life, Jesus said to him, “oh, there is one more thing. Sell everything you own, give it to the poor, and come follow me.”

When Jesus said that, suddenly, the rich man was confronted with a challenge. Up to that point, there was nothing that the man couldn't do for himself. He could take care of himself, even indulge himself because of his wealth, and he had even managed to live a moral life. Now, Jesus was telling him there was more- something hard, something costly, something that maybe didn't even seem to make sense in his mind, and the man went away sad because it was something that he didn't think he could do. It was too hard. Too strange. Too costly.

For the rich man, wealth was the thing that he had learned to trust, and for good reason. He had been taught and conditioned by his environment to value his wealth and what it could do for him. Depending on the measure that we use to define “rich,” you and I may not relate to being rich. By Elon Musk or Warren Buffet standards, we're all pretty much paupers, but no matter who we are, we are all subject to being conditioned and shaped by our environment just like the rich man was. There are certain rules and values that are widely accepted and promoted in our world, and it's easy to absorb them without even realizing it. Greed is good. Look out for number one. Might makes right. What's in it for me? They sound crass when reduced to those little soundbites, but they disguise themselves as “normal” and sneak into our thinking and behavior.

When Jesus told the man to sell all of his possessions, give them to the poor and follow him, he was trying to get his attention and wake him up. The man couldn't see that all of that stuff and his dependence on it was actually keeping him from true life. He was settling for something less than true life because he couldn't and wouldn't let go, and it wasn't just that he couldn't let go of the money. He couldn't and he wouldn't let go of the belief that his life would be found through his wealth and possessions. It's a tempting lie to believe. Survival is easier when you have what you need. Surviving comfortably is easier when you have what you need and more, and we tend to be willing to settle for that, but the life that Jesus offers is more than survival.

Like I mentioned earlier, Jesus was speaking in the language that made sense to the man. He was telling the man, in terms that he understood, that he needed to become like a child if he wanted to inherit eternal life and participate in Jesus's kingdom. Becoming childlike meant at least 2 things. It meant depending on Jesus rather than depending on himself and his things, and it meant becoming teachable. Jesus came to show what true life is and how to obtain it. Becoming childlike meant he would have to allow himself to be taught and led – even if Jesus described life differently than he and the people around him described it, and even if the things Jesus said about how to obtain life were in conflict with the things he had always heard or believed or practiced.

The story of the rich young ruler invites us to imagine how the conversation might go if we were the ones asking Jesus, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” We might be like the young man who had lots of good deeds that he could point to that showed he was a good person, and yet there may be ways in which we remain unteachable, or things that Jesus says that we have a hard time putting into practice, or things that we cling to for security when Jesus wants us to let go and trust him with childlike faith. Part of what happens when we decide to follow Jesus is that things get added to our lives – like in the story we heard last week. Jesus told Peter and James and John that if they followed him he would make them fishers of men. They gained a new vocation when they began following Jesus and when we follow Jesus we gain things, too. Spiritual blessings are added to our lives, we gain brothers and sisters in Christ, and new opportunities to love and serve come to us, but when we follow Jesus, we find out that there are also things that we have to let go of and letting go of things can be harder than picking things up sometimes. Are there possessions, or ideas, or habits that we are clinging to that are keeping us from obtaining the true and abundant life that Jesus wants to give to us? Are we teachable and willing to learn from Jesus, rather than all of the voices around us, what it means to truly live? Are we willing to allow our minds to be changed, and our hearts and lives to be redirected in order to keep in step with Jesus?

Last week we began this sermon series and the theme for last week was “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus.” When we say that we have decided to follow Jesus, we are saying that we are ready and willing for both the additions that Jesus brings to our lives and to let go of the things that would keep us from following him. We are saying that we are willing to learn and to be changed and to have our hearts renewed and our minds transformed. The good news is that when we do fully surrender to Jesus, we will find true life, but we learn from Jesus's encounter with the rich man that it can be costly. It can also be lonely.

Not everyone is ready to break with the normal patterns of life in this world, and not everyone is willing to trust or believe that his way is the way to life. There will always be people in this world who perpetuate the patterns of self-centeredness, and idolatry, and injustice, and violence, and hatred, and for as long as they do, there will be plenty of opportunities to join in, and blend in, and to go with the flow, but there will also be those opportunities to break with the patterns of this world, to let go, and to follow Jesus. At any given moment, we might have to be the weird one, or the unpopular one who goes against the flow

in order to follow Jesus, but even if and when we feel lonely, both Scripture and history remind us that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who believed God and lived by faith. Hebrews 11 gives a whole list of our biblical ancestors who lived by faith even when none went with them. In our church's Book of Confessions we have a document called the Barmen Declaration that bears witness to the faith of church leaders in Nazi Germany who rejected nationalism and resisted government control of the church. They went against the flow and took a stand and pledged their allegiance to Christ alone. As the author of Hebrews says in Hebrews 12:1: **"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us."**

The rich man's wealth was a weight that was holding him back. Jesus wanted him to let go of it – not because he wanted to make the man's life complicated or bad in any way but because Jesus could see what the man wasn't seeing – that his wealth and his attachment to it was keeping him from being able to take hold of the life that Jesus was offering. If there are things that Jesus is inviting us to lay down and let go of – be they things, or ideas, or values that we hold dear- we can trust what he says. Even if the voices all around us would say that we are crazy to listen and do what he says, even if no one else is willing to go with us, he is trustworthy. He is the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. If you have decided to follow him – keep following. Amen.