

Let's begin with the first phrase, "As Jesus was setting out on a journey..." We are now in the back half of Mark's gospel and Jesus' journey has a targeted outcome in Jerusalem. We, who have participated in the life of the church for years, know what awaits him there. If there's any question in your mind about that, consider that we have now entered the season of Lent - 40 days that culminate in Good Friday and Easter. We know where this "journey" is leading. Jesus has already told his disciples twice where this journey is leading -- the third, and final time, occurs directly after today's reading.

So, it is time to get down to the real deal - every teaching matters - everything Jesus offers his disciples needs to stick and become part of *who they are*. I dare say, sisters and brothers, if we proclaim our desire to follow Jesus, then we, too, need to receive Jesus' teachings and have them become part of *who we are*.

Today's teaching is straight-forward enough. No matter how "good" we are, if we allow our possessions to possess us, we cannot follow Jesus with all that we are.

Right? The wealthy person addresses Jesus as "good" (the Greek is "honorable," "upright"). And the person and Jesus work out the fact that they, too, have lived an upright life...keeping all of the commandments. (Btw, nobody is THAT perfect - Mark is making a point here; even the best people have vulnerabilities!) And indeed, Jesus picks out one very important chink in this person's moral armor - this one has, and holds onto, many possessions.

If we allow our possessions to possess us, we cannot follow Jesus with all that we are. If we are comfortable, while our neighbor is afflicted, then we should not be comfortable. And if we want to follow Jesus, and have difficulty reconciling this teaching, we, too, should react like the wealthy person does in this story, and we should leave Jesus vexed, confused, sorrowful...with a spiritual itch to scratch.

For citizens of a Capitalist nation, this teaching is difficult. Everything about our culture is “climb the ladder of success. Accumulate what you can and obtain your benefits.” And no matter how much of a “Christian” one claims to be, we have a hard time diminishing that call to wealth. Even Jesus’ disciples seem to believe that wealth equates to good status in God’s eyes. When Jesus blatantly instructs them, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’ ... They were greatly astounded and said to one another, ‘Then who can be saved?’”

That’s when the words of Grace came tumbling down: “Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’”

I like to believe that if that wealthy person came to Jesus with a truly open mind and open heart, then God was able to work with them. We can believe that it is possible that they saw journeying with Jesus to be more important than holding onto their possessions. It just took some time for them to work

out the importance of letting go. If the question was sincere, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”, then there is some serious discernment with which the person must engage.

Their “possessions” may have been more than just money and material items. In the concluding paragraph of this section, Mark alludes to the fact that family ties are equally hard to divest from in order to fully follow Jesus’ “way.” The one who came to Jesus may have also had some sticky family relationships that they would need to work through if being able to follow Jesus. As we read through the arc of the gospel narrative, it is interesting to see which characters drop their old lives in order to fully engage with Jesus - Peter points out that many of them did indeed leave all their “possessions” behind. The question becomes, do we need to go to the extremes of a Peter, or like Sts. Francis and Clare of Assisi who leave everything behind? Or, can we maintain possessions of a sort and still follow Jesus faithfully?

It’s a radical idea, and a high bar Jesus sets in this teaching. As we try to work this through as individuals, it can be quite a conundrum. This week I had occasion to think about this from a different angle. I am the moderator for the presbytery’s Committee on the Self-Development of People (SDOP). This Committee started in the early 1970’s after the General Assembly of that year was presented with some “radical” demands in a document called the “Black Manifesto.” Those of you who were alive then, need to think back on what was happening in the country then - the sit-ins and marches of the ‘60’s had transitioned into more urgent demands by people of color for not just civil

justice, but also economic justice. A man by the name of James Forman shopped concrete ideas for change around several denominations, believing that Christians should put their money where their mouths were if they were going to keep up with radical ideas presented by Jesus, like the one with which we are confronted today.

Part of Forman's demand was "that white religious institutions pay \$500 million in reparations for their past complicity in slavery and discrimination."

White Presbyterians, whose reactions to the manifesto ranged from grudging openness to anger and disbelief, were surprised to learn that most black Presbyterian pastors firmly backed Forman's demands.

One such pastor, Gayraud S. Wilmore, became a bridge between Forman and members of Wilmore's predominantly white denomination.

Wilmore and others convinced the (General Assembly) to respond by creating two initiatives, both of which, in the self-determination spirit of black power, enabled working class people to improve their own economic circumstances. One, the Presbyterian Economic Development Corporation (PEDCO), provided millions in low-interest loans to minority-owned businesses from 1969 to 1988. The other, which is still active today, is the National (or "Presbyterian") Committee on the Self-Development of People (SDOP), which provides community-development grants in impoverished communities, and allows members of those communities to manage the funds themselves. Partly funded through the annual One Great Hour of Sharing offering, **{I'll return to this in a moment.}** SDOP has shared millions of dollars

through grants since 1970. While the church has never called these funds “reparations” and they pale in comparison to the actual wealth created by centuries of enslaved labor, they are in fact among very few successful reparations efforts in U.S. history.

(info found in the article,

<https://pres-outlook.org/2018/12/a-presbyterian-prophet-of-black-power-the-witness-of-gayraud-s-wi>
[lmore/](#))

In light of the teaching Jesus offered to the wealthy person who came to him, how does a church, or a denomination, handle its “possessions”? If Jesus’ call was to give all the possessions to “the poor,” how do we come to understand what that designation means. James Forman forced our denomination to think about the unjust systems that caused much of the disparity among the “rich” and the “poor” in this nation. Perhaps Jesus’ demand on the wealthy person was a call to repair such injustices.

Regardless, the denomination’s decision to receive a special offering denomination-wide is one way we, as a whole denomination--rich in possessions--can work to repair many types of breaches.

Throughout the season of Lent we receive one of our denominations' four special offerings. This one is the One Great Hour of Sharing. The funds collected from congregations across the denomination address three important areas: hunger, poverty, and disaster. The offering gives us the opportunity to follow Jesus' command to turn what we possess into blessings

for people struggling in one way, shape, or form. Over the next three weeks I will be spending time in the sermon highlighting the good work done by three PCUSA entities: the aforementioned Committee on the Self-Development of People, the Presbyterian Hunger Program, and Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. (In fact, just this week, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance released a preparedness guide to address the coronavirus pandemic.) The work these entities do with our resources, and on our behalf, is incredible.

In the past few years, we/I haven't done a lot to spotlight the recipients of the One Great Hour of Sharing offering, and I believe LCPC could be doing a much better job of letting go of some of our resources in order to further step into being the "good" people Jesus calls us to be. We usually receive the One Great Hour offering on Easter. However, should you decide to donate at any point during the season, please designate OGHS on the check or envelope, so we know it will get to the right place.

Thanks be to you, for your generosity, and thanks be to God for making all things possible. Amen.