



Sunday, October 13, 2024

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 10:17-31

“Numbering Our Days”

Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

On some Sundays you might be wondering, ‘What do all these readings have to do with each other?’ Sometimes it’s hard to fathom, even though the compilers of the lectionary always had a theme in mind. Today it’s clear as the sound of a trumpet: Seek good and not evil. Seek the Lord, and live. Be mindful of the days on earth God has given us, and apply them to wisdom. Turn away from any attitude or practice or temptation that puts distance between you and God.

And if you are not sure what these attitudes are, the razor-sharp word of God will reveal them to you. God’s word divides those who lie / from the righteous who desire only to know and proclaim the living God. It lays bare the true intentions of the heart. You can pretend you are one thing, but God’s word will reveal you really are. Are you one who rejects the truth? Are you one who tramples on the poor? You’ll find yourself judged in any number of places in scripture, such as Amos today:

Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood,
and bring righteousness to the ground!

Or are you like the rich man in Mark 10, in which discipleship is a commodity to be tailored to one’s preferences? Why did this man go away grieving? I think because he thought he had it made. He had made a good name for himself with many possessions. He had followed all the commandments. Now he was going to add another notch in his belt by being a disciple of Jesus. But he didn’t know what would be demanded of him – that he would have to sell everything he owned and give the money to the poor. He was not sad because he couldn’t do it. He was grieving because being a follower of Jesus was something he was not going to be able to add to his resume after all.

What is the message for us? Obviously not that we have to sell all our possessions. It is not practical for us to do what Jesus commanded this man, because our families depend on us having things to support our lives together. I did once hear a sermon on this text in a big Episcopal church, whose members I knew had excess wealth. The priest pounded on the pulpit and ordered them to go home and sell their third car. Not quite what Jesus was asking, and anyway I’m pretty sure none of them did.

Rather, Jesus is calling to us today to live in an entirely new way. We are to consider not what we have but how we live. Can we live AS IF we sold all our possessions and gave the money to the poor? Can we live AS IF all these things have no control over us, AS IF a significant part of what we do each day is not given over to protecting our stuff and getting more stuff? Can we live AS IF we were truly inhabitants of the kingdom of God? That is, AS IF the great commandment to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind,” and to “Love your neighbor as yourself,” animates our every breath?

As we heard in our Women Mystics class last Monday, that this is exactly how the great 4th and 5th century monks of the Egyptian desert lived. Today's reading from Mark 10, in fact, was how that entire movement got started. In 285 AD a well-to-do young Christian man named Anthony heard what Jesus told the wealthy man and sold everything he had, gave the proceeds to the poor and began a life of fasting and prayer in a desert cave far from Alexandria.

Anthony became the first in a growing community of Christian desert dwellers, including women, who could no longer tolerate the violence and oppressive worldliness of the Roman culture. Living far apart from each other in loosely organized communities, they left everything behind for lives of solitude that stripped away anything that kept them from knowing God. Fortunately a steady stream of pilgrims recorded their teachings and sayings, which continue to be foundational for Christian spirituality.

Following Christ, the Desert Abbas and Ammas held love as the goal of the Christian life -- loving God and equally loving all those created in God's image. They understood that true humility made this possible -- humility not as self-deprecation, or reducing one's self beneath others, but a humility that embraces all people as equally valuable in God's sight.

The long days and weeks of before they saw another human being were not simply spent in quiet prayer. They battled demons who tempted them with attitudes they called "passions" which separated them from God and from their fellow human beings.

The most dangerous of these was pride, which was not necessarily having a high opinion of one's self as having a low opinion of everyone else. A person afflicted with pride devalues others in relation to themselves. Other passions they identified which disrupt the goal of love through humility included gossip, talking too much, excessive religiosity, envy, anger, avarice -- the unwillingness to share one's resources with others -- indifference, and acedia, an empty, restless boredom that makes ordinary tasks too dull to bear.

They taught that these passions unfolded in a person in four stages -- in the heart, in the face, with words, and in deeds. At each stage, we have the choice of allowing the passion to grow into the next stage, or preventing it. Picture anger following these four stages and you can easily apply that awareness that to any of these other attitudes.

Now, back at how Jesus is calling to us in Mark 10. It is just as unlikely that any of us will become desert dwellers as that we would be able to sell all our possessions. But we can pay close attention to these passions, these attitudes that draw us away from God, individually and as a society. Of course, materialism is of course a big one -- allowing stuff and what we do with it to shape the course of our lives.

Last week I saw a story about the Dodgers starting pitcher who was jostled in crowd at the racetrack, only to find his super-expensive watch had been stolen in what was called "a brazen mugging." What's with these watches, anyway? I asked AI, "Why do people feel they need to wear such expensive watches?" I was thinking, isn't something like this beat-up old Apple Watch good enough?

Here is what AI told me this: "You will feel more secure financially with such an expensive timepiece strapped to your wrist. This singles you out from the rest of the crowd. The practical benefits include the fact that you look like you are loaded."

How can this possibly be a good thing? Obviously it didn't work out for Walker Buehler.

Today's texts are calling us to be mindful of the "cravings at war within us [that] cause conflicts and disputes," in the words of our Confession. Be vigilant about any of the dangerous passions that draw you away from God, and of attempts by others to instill those same fears in us.

Life is too short for all that. The wounded God who knows our pain, the crucified God who died in our place, the resurrected God who lives that we also live, is calling us to number our days, to treasure each one for the new horizons of radical love Jesus invites us to move through so that someday, somehow, the perfect love of God's kingdom will be shared equally by everyone. Living in this way IS difficult, just as Jesus says. But for God, all things are possible.

Amen.