

Sermon
October 11, 2009

Let us take a moment to pray and center ourselves.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts and midst be acceptable in your sight oh Lord.

Where do your blessings come from?

In today's world we might not draw a strong link between our faithfulness to God and our material possessions but back in the period when our scriptures were written this connection was a part of their theology.

If you were rich and in good health it was because God had blessed you for being righteous and worthy.

However, if you were poor, sick or had a physical disability the community would assume that you had sinned and fallen out of God's favour.

In our scripture readings today we meet men who are or had been on top of the world.

They were rich, probably with land, animals, servants, heirs to carry on the family name.

They would have been known in the community as men who followed the laws of God.

With all the blessings they had been given, people would have believed that they were on the fast track to heaven.

So I think when the rich man in Mark's Gospel approached Jesus expecting to be told that he had nothing else to do.

Maybe he even thought he would be thanked for being such a faithful servant of God.

What a surprise it must have been for him when Jesus tells him..yes you have done well but now let's raise the bar.

And Wow did Jesus raise the bar for this man.

What Jesus told the rich man was radicalSell off all that God has blessed you with and give it to the sinners on the streets and once you have done that come and follow me.

We will live with no possessions, teach in the streets, and rely on God to move others into providing for our basic needs.

You will leave your family and friends, but they will probably think you are crazy anyway and try and disassociate them selves from you anyway.

Not the easiest message to swallow is it, Just think about what the man standing in front of Jesus would have felt like...(count to 10)

we are told that the Rich man was shocked and went away grieving for he had many possessions.

Now I bet most of you are thinking 'Oh, yes this man left Jesus grieving because he was not willing to give up his possessions.'

This is probably the way that this story was presented to you from the time you were in Sunday school with the message that we need to be more generous, not let our possessions get in the way of our relationship with God and that God favours the poor.

This certainly has been the dominant view in our Christian tradition. However, if you look closely at the scriptures we are not actually told what the man decides or what he does after he leaves.

David Howell in *Feasting on the word* suggests an alternative reading.

He suggests that the man has made the decision to follow Jesus.

Howell reminds us that change is not easy and giving up what we hold onto for support and comfort can be painful to give up.

For the Rich Man found in our scriptures to follow Jesus he would not just be letting go of physical possessions but also have to go through an emotional letting go of all his possessions and the relationships and privilege that came along with them.

We are not told what happens to this rich man but our readings today did tell us about another faithful man who had everything taken from him. That is we heard a reading from the book of Job.

Like the rich man, Job had it all, houses, animals, family, riches beyond most people.

Earlier in this book we are told that Job was a faithful and righteous man, and that God had held nothing back from him.

But things changed for Job when the Agitator prompted God to test Job's faithfulness.

Through a series of events Everything is taken away from Job.

Hearing of his loss Job's friends come to comfort him...however they carry with them the ideology that Job's suffering and loss is a result of sin.

His friends in discussions, reflect a theology which he too once held but now rejects because of his lived experience.

Job's previous understanding of how God works no longer fit his experience and job is left struggling to understand what has happened to his life.

Today we read about how Job was calling out, searching for God, wanting to know Gods will and presence again.

Both Job and the rich man are faced with a turning point on their faith journeys.

Job is faced with a reality that challenges his theology; where as the rich man is being called to a new pattern of life.

Both of these turning points will involve a new way of living faithfully as they shift underline thought and views.

I think in many ways united memorial is also at a turning point.

We are experiencing a time of uncertainty, anxiety and maybe even searching for where God is for us.

I hear echo's of Job in the lament 'we are good people, doing Good work, why are we struggling so.' Or in the question 'do you think we will survive?'. (pause)

As a community of faith at united memorial we are asking big questions of faith such as where is God today?

What does faith look like?

What are we called to do and be?

Who is part of our community?

Some of these questions are being raised because we have found ourselves in a place where our current understanding does not seem adequate.

Other questions are being raised because new voices are being heard in our conversation of faith and these voices bring challenges to long held beliefs and practices.

Regardless of the origin of big questions represent turning points and open us up to deeper understanding and revelation of God's love and works.

As we venture into these deep questions it would be wise to keep in mind a lesson from scriptures today.

That is faith is not always easy.

As we answer questions we might not agree, we may feel as if the firm foundations we once know is being eroded, we might need to mourn, be angry or we might feel fearful.

Like the rich man who asked 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' We might not always like the answer.

When our personal faith is being challenged, it might feel like we are in darkness, We might struggle to feel God's presence.

At times like that faith like Job can help us through. At the end of our reading today the New International Version reads

Yet I am not silenced by the darkness, by the thick darkness that covers my face.

The darkness, those parts of our journey that are scary, challenging beyond what we think our limits are need not stop us.

Job says I will not be silenced. He continues to be in conversation with God.

And what of our rich man, as he mourns the loss of all that he knows, all that is familiar he may feel like he is entering his own darkness.

We are told that this is not an easy process for the rich man to enter the kingdom.

Shocked as well by the parable Peter asks then who can be saved? And we learn that it is only by God that people can be saved.

And what about us at United Memorial? By struggling with the questions, and asking for God's help in finding solutions, we enter into the realm of the kingdom of God.

Jesus invites the man to come and follow... and he also invites us to follow, to risk following his way.

By considering our experience, our scriptures, reason and tradition when making decisions we are following Jesus.

When our responses to big faith questions are centered on the central message of our scriptures that is we are focused on love of God.

Then we are faithfully seeking answers to our questions.

And if we are letting these answers guide our way of being we are joining with Jesus in the activities of the Kingdom,

In following Jesus we risk greatly.

We risk that we many have to journey for a while in darkness.

We risk being transformed by our experience,

we risk our thoughts and actions being reworked beyond recognition

we risk laying aside old ways,

And we risk being used for the glory of God.

But as people of faith we Risk with the hope and promise of reward far greater

And we risk the darkness, trouble and strife knowing that like Jesus who looked lovingly on the rich man...God loves us too.

So in Each question and answer we can take one more step on the road of faith, in the love of God, in the fellowship of Jesus and with the guidance of the spirit.