

Doing More Is Not the Answer

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October 14, 2018

Mark 10:17-27

Koinonia Farms, the forerunner of Habitat for Humanity, is a communal farm near Americus, Georgia. It was started in the 1940s by Clarence Jordan, a Baptist minister and New Testament scholar. Jordan believed true discipleship meant forsaking everything to follow Jesus. Anyone wishing to join the community was required to give away everything they had.

Once a woman spent several days visiting the farm and inquired about joining. She arrived in an old jalopy and looked to be a poor spinster, so Jordan anticipated no problems with her selling everything she had. Turned out he was wrong. Despite appearances, the woman was well heeled for that place and time. She had about \$90,000, a considerable sum in those days, well over a million dollars in today's currency.

"Jesus said it would be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom," Jordan later recalled, "but we'd never even had one *apply* at our place."

He swallowed hard and reaffirmed the community's covenant that the woman had to enter flat broke. She could give the money to relatives, donate it to the poor, or throw it off a bridge, but she couldn't join until it was gone.

"What if I give it to Koinonia Farms?" she asked.

Clarence grinned and answered, "No, if you put that money in here several things would happen. First of all, we'd quit growing peanuts and start discussing theology. That wouldn't be a healthy condition for us.

"And in the next place, unless I miss my guess, you are a very lonely person, and you are lonely because you think every friend you ever had was after your money."

The woman confirmed that judgment.

"Well," Clarence continued, "if you put that money in here, you would think we courted you for your money, that we loved you for your money. And you would get the idea you were God's guardian angel, that you endowed the rest of us, and that all of us ought to be grateful to you for the beneficence."

The woman nodded her understanding and Clarence pressed his invitation home. "Now for your sake, and our sakes, get rid of that money and come walk with us."

But she couldn't muster the faith and courage to do it. Tearfully, she replied, "I can't." Then she packed up her old jalopy, and was gone.

I've never known anyone personally who gave up everything to follow Jesus. I certainly have not. To the contrary, most everything I love most about my life, including my vocation and livelihood, comes from following Jesus.

Still, I can't help but wonder: if Jesus asked me to give up everything to follow him, like Clarence Jordan or Saint Francis of Assisi, could I, would I, do it?

The story of the one Christian tradition dubbed the rich, young, ruler presses that question home. The story begins as Jesus is setting off on a journey. Suddenly, this man comes running up. Gasping for air, the man kneels and says, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

The man's question is a clear sign of his privilege: "What must I *do*?" Well-intentioned people of privilege like me, always assume there is something they can *do* to make everything better.

Jesus isn't impressed. "Why do you call me good," he asks, deflecting attention from himself to the One who sent him: "No one is good but God."

"You know the commandments," Jesus continues. "You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud; honor your father and mother."

These commandments are drawn from the second table of the 10 Commandments, namely, the commandments that concern loving one's neighbor. And just for good measure, Jesus throws in a new one: "Do not defraud." This may be a hint this man has not come by his wealth honestly.

Clearly, Jesus believes this man already has what he needs to find salvation. The Ten Commandments, like much of the law and prophets, tell this man what God requires: that he *use* his wealth and privilege to relieve the suffering of others. For Jesus, the case is closed. He turns to resume his journey.

But the man clutches the hem of Jesus' robe, like a drowning man grabbing a lifeline. "But teacher," he cries, "I have done all these things from my youth!"

That's when time stops; and the movie sequence shifts to slow motion. And in the script, Mark's gospel tells us, "And Jesus, looking at him, loved him."

With a loving, penetrating gaze, Jesus peers deep into this man's heart. Like the doctor of the soul, he is, Jesus pauses to assess what ails the man. Then he sees it, nods and says, "One thing you lack: go, sell everything you own and give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

But like the woman in the jalopy at Koinonia Farms, the man can't summon the faith and courage to do it. So he goes away sorrowful, because he "had many possessions."

As a teenager, my daughter, Whitney, injured her back in a trampoline accident. For years, she has struggled with back pain. She's done her back exercises and physical therapy, worn a brace, gotten massages, and had cortisone shots but her back pain has continued to worsen. Now it's to the point she can't play tag or whiffle ball in the backyard with her two little boys.

Desperate to get her strength and mobility back, she's decided to undergo surgery. For her, the pain got to the point surgery was no longer a dreaded sentence but a welcome option.

Jesus' challenge to the man in Mark's story is the equivalent to a physician saying, "Look, we've done all we can do. If you want relief from what ails you, then surgery is your only option."

"So come," says Jesus, "sell off all the stuff that is holding you back and join me in a journey of transformation."

But in the end, the man chooses the chronic pain he is living with rather than the freedom and release Jesus offers.

What about us? What about people of influence and means, position and privilege, like me? Do we need to divest ourselves of everything we own to follow Jesus? It's a tricky question because the act of rendering ourselves dirt poor could easily be just another grand gesture of glorified doing and self-importance. As Bonhoeffer writes in *The Cost of Discipleship*, "Obedience to the call of Jesus never lies within our own power. If, for instance, we give away all our possessions, that act is not in itself the obedience he demands. In fact such a step might be the precise opposite of obedience to Jesus, for we might then be choosing a way of life for ourselves, some Christian ideal, or some ideal of Franciscan poverty."

“The step into the situation where faith is possible is not an offer which we can make to Jesus, but always his gracious offer to us. Only when the step is taken in this spirit is it admissible.”

But what Jesus *does* ask of us all is that we give up the pride and privilege that blinds us to the needs of the world. That’s what we must give up to follow him. Because once we begin a journey of transformation with Jesus, our eyes are opened to the world’s need and our ears are opened to the world’s pain. And once that happens, our hearts and hands start opening up too.

This happened to me in a small way at a recent Saturday morning training session on racial equity held here at our church. I was a reluctant participant, because for me, as for most people, Saturday mornings are sacred time and in my case, the only time I can find enough quiet and solitude to actually write a sermon! But as so often happens, my friends and fellow pilgrims at Knollwood called out the best in me, instead of settling for the worst. So there I sat in a room with forty of Knollwood’s finest, exploring the frayed and tattered state of racial relations in America.

At one point, we each took a private walk around the fellowship hall, gazing at pictures and captions that detailed the church’s long and tortured history of using violence as an instrument of state policy, from butchering Muslims in Jesus’ name during the Crusades to the forced conversion of Mayans and Native Americans.

But for me, the most grueling part of that walk was learning about our nation’s own history of racial oppression, from decreeing that slaves were only three-fifths of a person at the constitutional convention to creating a Jim Crow system after the Civil War that effectively kept people of color in their place.

Granted, I “knew” all this before. But never had I been forced to confront these ugly realities in such a painful, personal way.

And ever since, when I hear about a black school child or young black man fleeing a police officer--someone my comfortable, white, middle class life makes it easy for me to trust--I am slower to judge and quicker to understand.

Maybe in our place and time, what Jesus longs for us to give up is the prideful assumption we are thriving and successful, solely because of our hard work and merit. While failing to recognize or acknowledge the advantages of birth and education and affluence we enjoy that our less-privileged neighbors do not.

And if just the thought of that prickly truth, makes you uncomfortable or angry--as it does me--then Jesus has struck a nerve, yet again. Now he looks at *us* and says, "One thing you lack: let go of your imagined superiority to those who are poor, or struggling, or oppressed. And come to know them as my brothers and sisters and yours too. Then you'll be able to follow me in a way that was not possible before."

It's a little like living in a neighborhood, as I do, that came through Hurricane Michael unscathed. And yet when I venture out from my safe, protected neighborhood and see the damage and loss others are facing, it stirs and awakens my heart.

Maybe as a result, I open my safe, comfortable home to friends or family who need a place to land. And should I venture out by way of news reports to witness the utter devastation and ruin in Mexico Beach, Florida, or on the shores of Indonesia, or in parts of North Carolina trying to recover from Florence, the heartache may open my wallet too.

No, the invitation that changes everything is not, "Sell everything you have."

The invitation that changes everything is "Come, follow me."

For in following Jesus, we come to know people, precious to him but previously unknown to us, who desperately need his good news. And suddenly, we find ourselves wanting to use our privilege and resources to help, instead of fiercely protecting them at all costs.

A certain man was angry that his prayers were not being answered, at least not in the way he intended. Finally one day, he stopped praying, looked heavenward, and cried, "Hey *You* up there, can you hear me?"

There was no answer.

Feeling sassy, the man muttered under his breath, "So God, if you really can hear me, go ahead tell me what you want me to do with my life!"

Suddenly, thunder roared and a voice from heaven sounded. "Yeah, I can hear you. And this is what I want you to do: Sell everything you have and give it to the poor."

There was a long silence. Finally, the man said sheepishly, "Well, Lord, to tell you the truth, I was just checking to see if you were there."

"No problem," the Almighty answered. "Because to tell you the truth, I was just checking to see if *you* were there!"

Maybe that's what Jesus is after in this unsettling encounter from the Gospel of Mark. Maybe Jesus is not demanding everything we own. Maybe he is just checking to see *if we are even there*, wrestling with his summons and trying to screw up the faith and courage to follow.

Because, when and if Jesus opens your eyes in the journey of discipleship, your heart and hands will start opening up too.

Lord Jesus, we are so afraid of what you might want to take. Awaken us to what you long to give. Draw us into a journey of transformation that opens our eyes and ears, hearts and hands, to our neighbors in need. In short, give us the faith and abandon of a child that we might follow you. In your name we ask this of our loving Abba, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.