A Love Story

Jesus was on the way. The NRSV that we read this morning said that he was on the road, but on the way catches Mark’s meaning better. You see, the Way was the very first name for those who follow Jesus. When Mark says Jesus was on the way, it not only means he was on the road again or even that he was on the way to Jerusalem. It means that He was on God’s way himself, and showing those who traveled with him what the Jesus way, the way of discipleship looks like. So when the man comes running up to him on the way, it’s not just a chance meeting. We need to perk our ears up and listen for what we can learn.

I wonder if the man in our gospel story this morning was an oldest child. I speak as an oldest child myself, but if you’re not an oldest, maybe you can think of your older brother or sister. Maybe you experienced us as bossy or controlling, but really we were just trying very hard to live up to our responsibilities and get it right. So we kept all the rules and worked as hard as we could and tried our best to live up to other peoples’ expectations. Other people probably thought we were perfectionists, not in a good way. We just thought we had high standards.

So it is with this man, who comes to Jesus and kneels in front of him in all sincerity. “Good teacher,” he asks, “what must I do to gain eternal life?” What do I have to do to get straight A’s, to go to the head of the class, to be the best person ever? What do I have to do to get it right?

Jesus answers him, “You know the commandments.” Then he recites the whole second half of the ten commandments, the ones that all have to do with how we humans deal with one another.

“But I’ve done all that since I was a kid.”

And yet …he’s still asking the question. What drove him to it? Was he afraid he hadn’t gotten it right? Or did he know in the pit of his stomach, at the bottom of his heart, that something was still missing? Because that’s the problem with being a perfectionist. No matter how hard you try, you’re never perfect. You never get it exactly right. Even if it looks good to other people, you can always see the flaw. And if you can see the flaw, then so can God, who sees and knows everything. You can never be good enough, not for yourself, not for God.

Then comes the most remarkable moment in the story. It’s so brief that you might miss it. Mark says Jesus looked at the man and loved him. This is one of only two times in the whole gospel that Mark says Jesus loves someone, and this is who it is. This man who is trying so hard to get it right, this man who has entirely missed the point.

Listen again to his first question. “What do I have to do to get eternal life?” Agnes Norfleet, the pastor at Bryn Mawr Pres., said, “Jesus’ response to him and to Peter and to us is, “the cost of eternal life is too high for you to accept. It is free.” There is nothing we can do to inherit eternal life. It is as impossible as threading a camel through the eye of a needle. The only thing we can do is to receive eternal life as a gift of God’s love. To accept the fact that life – life itself – is a gift from God and eternal life has been won for us by Jesus Christ. It is freely given. It is pure grace.”

Jesus loves the man. He offers him what he asked for, although he doesn’t realize that’s what Jesus is doing. All he asks is that the man make room for the gift he has been given and empty his hands so he can accept it. “One thing you have to do,” Jesus says. “Sell everything you have and give the money to the poor and follow me.” Let go of all those things that fill your hands and your house and your barn. Let go of all those things that fill you up there’s no room for a relationship with me or compassion for anyone else. Empty your hands so you can accept my gift, my grace, my love.

But he just can’t do it. Mark says he walks away sad because he has so much stuff and he can’t give it all up. I get that. I love my stuff too – my roomy house with a roof that doesn’t leak, my car that runs, my pictures and other little things that remind me of people I love, my books. Surely Jesus can’t mean we’re supposed to be homeless and wear rags all the time.

I don’t know about that for sure. I have always greatly admired those folks like Francis of Assisi and those desert mothers and fathers from 2nd and 3rd century who did just that, left all their riches, all their possessions behind to follow Jesus. Even the disciples, who most of the time are so clueless, got Jesus’ point here, as Peter points out. They did give up everything for Jesus. I think Jesus does ask us to do hard things sometimes.

that letting go is letting go of more than just stuff. It is also letting go of control. That requires trust – trust in someone who isn’t us. Trust that we will be held, trust that there will be enough, trust that God wants to give us good things.

That’s hard for us oldest/perfectionist types.

Yet once you do that, once you open your hands and let go of the stuff, once you receive what God is offering in its place, you wonder why you ever thought the stuff was that important. Because instead of all the things you held on to, you receive an awareness of God’s abundant and undeserved goodness, in all times, in all places. And that knowledge of God’s goodness and generosity awakens generosity in you.

K. C. Ptomey, a seasoned Presbyterian pastor, talked about all the different techniques he had seen used during 41 years of stewardship campaigns. Yet no one technique unlocked the generosity of people until they experienced the awareness of God’s goodness and grace.

“Drive down the streets on a Fall day and feast your eyes on of the colors,” he said. “That’ll do it. Hold your newborn child or grandchild in your arms and feel those tiny fingers wrap around yours. That’ll do it. Listen to the doctor who, after long hours of surgery reports that your loved one is going to be okay. That’ll do it. Stand in this church any Sunday, joining your voice with all the others singing of God’s tenderness, God’s forgiveness, God’s care. That’ll do it. Look around you this morning and think of one or two of these people who have been an important part of your life, who have loved you and encouraged you and supported you. That’ll do it. Simply be aware of what God has done for you.”

With that awareness, your clenched hands and clenched hearts open as you reach out in praise, reach up with gratitude. And as you open your hands and reach out, all those things you were holding on to so tightly, all those things you thought you needed, fall away. Your load is lightened and you are set free to live, to dance, to follow.

Our poor oldest child perfectionist friend went home that day sorrowful because he couldn’t believe it would be that easy. The rest of us watch him and practice opening our hands and letting go, letting go of what we grasp so we can receive what is offered – God’s unmerited, unbounded, amazing grace and love.

I also wonder if part the reason the man who wanted to be perfect walked away sad that day was because he couldn’t believe it would be that easy. Surely Jesus would require something harder than just opening your hands and letting go.