

Job 23:1-9, 16-17 ~ Mark 10:17-31

It's Okay to Not be Okay

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Introduction to Scripture Lesson

We are about to hear another sad story. It's another story about a religious, upright man who appears to have it all. Kind of like Job's life, when we first meet him in Job 1. This rich man has done everything right according, he's followed all the rules. Kept his nose clean. He should be okay, right? But he must have some lingering doubts, or else this I don't think this story would have happened. What Jesus says to the man upsets his disciples as well. Again, they are confused and frustrated by what Jesus is teaching them. No one, except Jesus, seems to be Okay by the end of this story.

Fear not, if this story shocks, or grieves, or upsets or astounds you, perhaps it is reaching right where Jesus wants it to. Let us partake in the sacred as we listen to God's holy, life-giving, word, as it is written in Mark 10:17-31.

Sermon

I should know better than to title a sermon, "It's Okay to not be Okay." I've noticed over the years of preaching that whatever title or idea God's seems to be percolating inside of me on my way to a sermon, I have to go through that experience at some point in the week. Especially early Sunday morning. So, of course, early this morning, when I was already feeling behind from where I like to be on my sermon on a Sunday morning, my computer freezes up on me. The file seems to be open in some other application: God knows what. No matter what I try, I can't get to the half-baked sermon I'm trying to bring over the finish line. My computer will not let me open it. My heart starts pounding: I'm definitely *not* Okay. And I hear that voice, I see that wry smile, "remember, it's Okay to not be Okay."

With a computer, we can "force quit," right? That eventually did the trick for me. But it got me to thinking, isn't that something like what Jesus was teaching this man who thought he was doing everything right? You might say that Job went through a similarly excruciating spiritual journey into the darkness. You heard him in today's text that Gerri read. Job couldn't find God anywhere. No matter what direction he looked. Nothing made sense anymore. He became completely disoriented and distraught. But that is not the end of the story for Job. We don't know how the story ended for the rich man in Mark 10. Kind of like the way we don't know the end of the story for the elder brother who was too angry and resentful and jealous to go to the party that the father was throwing for his younger son who had come home. Did the disorientation and

confusion lead to a new level of discipleship for the rich man, or the elder brother? We will never know. It is our story that Jesus is looking at us about.

The first thing that gets blown apart in our Job and our Mark scriptures is a kind of theology that is sometimes called the "prosperity gospel." This is the gospel that says that if we are good and deserving, God will reward us with health and wealth. And if we are poor and/or sick it's because we are being punished for doing it wrong. That is not the Gospel of our Lord and Savior. That is not what Jesus teaches us about the kingdom or kin-dom of God. Or the reason he came to this earth. We never hear the offer of comfort and easy living for doing right from Jesus. We see hear vividly what Jesus is calling us to. It's actually closer to the opposite.

Did you hear what Jesus told the rich man he must do? Jesus told him to reverse course: to stop acquiring (wealth, status, affirmation) and start letting go of (power, money, privilege) in order to follow the One who didn't "puff himself up" but poured himself out. It seems like what Jesus said to the rich man also confused the disciples. We don't like what Jesus said to the rich man either.

We have been trying to water it down or wriggle out of it at least since the Middle Ages. You know the crazy phrase I'm talking about: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." Contrary to medieval legend there is no narrow gate in Jerusalem called the "Eye of the Needle." Sorry folks, no gate. He meant a needle. Nor is there any plausible way to translate the word "camel" as "rope." Nope. He meant camel. In fact, there is a Talmudic parallel that uses a needle's eye and an elephant to make the same point! God bursting through our impossible with a world of unimaginable possibilities.

Another way we try to soften Jesus' hard saying here is by narrowing Jesus' intended audience by saying, "Well, he was just talking to that one man, only that one man had to go sell all his stuff." But, if you look carefully at our story, when Jesus was speaking to *all* his disciples. And yes, friends, in case you are thinking, well how did Jesus define rich, I'm not rich-- about look at the tax bracket I'm in, that is not the point either. In the eyes of Jesus, if we are sitting in this sanctuary, or viewing this service online, we are rich. Yes, friends he meant you. And he meant me.

And I think while, Jesus is calling us to examine our relationship to our stuff and the ways what we own, or want to own, can begin to own us and take over our lives, he's getting at something even broader. He's also talking about letting go of status and privilege. The more status we have, the more privileged we are, the more self-sufficient, and yes, self-satisfied we become, the harder it is for us to see and hear Jesus' call. Who

needs God, when we have all of this "security" and standing? This holds true for good church goers like you and me, too.

I want to share a story with you about a couple, a man and woman, whom I've never met, and probably never will. Dolores Aue, filling in as our Executive Assistant met the woman, who felt drawn to our church in the midst of the terrible storm of calamity and crisis she and her husband are right in the middle of experiencing. They are "good Presbyterians" active in their church in Colorado, flew to Wisconsin for an early fall vacation at their lake place. Had a great time until they were pulling their boat out of the lake for the season, and the boat crushed her husband's pelvic bone. The first bone that he has ever broken in his life. He was rushed to the Marshfield Clinic and underwent surgery for the bone, and in the process came down with a breakthrough case of COVID, and so now is in the COVID floor at the clinic, alone, not allowed to have any visitors including his wife. But she saw our "We Choose Welcome" sign, our rainbow yarn installations on our lamp posts and our labyrinth. She felt welcomed, accepted, and at home in this strange Wisconsin land. She walked our labyrinth, and felt God's healing presence.

When I spoke with her husband on the phone, I was bowled over by what he shared. Through tears of joy, he spoke of how his eyes and heart have opened in a brand-new way. After attending church for years. This disorienting, upending experience of the broken bone and then COVID, he said he was seeing Christ in every person, in the love that he was feeling from the staff at the hospital, the calls of grandchildren and children. And the conversations with his wife. He had never felt God's presence so vividly before in his life.

Being "not okay," binds us together, I believe. Being "not okay" is something we all share. If we are honest. It's when we pretend that we're okay and we are not, that gets us into trouble. Jesus didn't do that, why should we? Being fully human, Jesus chose to experiencing being "not okay" by his self-emptying path that led him eventually to the cross. And on the cross he lamented his utter sense of abandonment, in the words of Psalm 22, "My God, God, why have you forsaken me?" If Jesus prayed that, so can we.

Being not okay attunes us to others who are suffering. And calls us to take responsibility for the ways we are a part of a system that keeps others from being okay because of their race or gender identity or sexual orientation. On the eve of what we commonly celebrate as "Columbus Day" I feel compelled to lift up the work of Sarah Augustine, and the truth she has taught me, from her book, *The Land is Not Empty: Following Jesus in Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery*.ⁱ A doctrine that I believe we are

being called to do dismantle as a Matthew 25 church, that is committed to dismantling systemic racism. Here's what I learned from her: the "Doctrine of Discovery" in a broad sense is a body of law and policy that determines the fate of indigenous people to this day. Early colonization, rules about who would get what. It began with a series of papal bulls back in the time of the Holy Roman Empire, and then was adopted into US, and by our Supreme Court.

The Doctrine of Discovery continues to drive land tenure law to this day. In 2005, Ruth Bader Ginsburg wrote the majority decision in a case denying indigenous people the right to reclaim sovereignty to the land that was taken from them. The Doctrine of Discovery, is not a liberal/conservative issue. It is settled law, based on the underlying assumption that Christians were empowered by God to go to nations and to take those lands as a birthright and the people who lives on those lands did not have an inherent right to those lands. This is now considered settled law—Canada, New Zealand, Australia, South and Central America deeply rooted—the people who have inherent right to the land are the colonists. Not the people who lived there originally.

Yes, our church, we Christians originated the "Doctrine of Discovery" the precept that justifies land theft on an epic scale. Yet, Jesus' own mandate in Luke 4:18-19, calls us as Christians to stand with the powerless. In our scripture today, I hear Jesus' call to us, if we want to follow him, to do what we can, in the short time we have on this earth, to dismantle the "Doctrine of Discovery" that I believe contradicts and undermines the very core of Jesus' gospel. Yes, we have a lot to lose, those of us who have benefited from this Doctrine. I have to be honest, growing up, I loved the exciting stories of the "explorers" including Christopher Columbus in 1492 sailing the ocean blue. But now I am starting to see this story differently.

When Jesus looks at you, and loves you, what do you hear him calling you to let go of or to leave behind? Is it stuff, or status, or privilege? When Jesus looks at us and loves us, what do we hear him calling us to let go of as a church? I consider our disproportionate carbon footprint and know there's much to let go of to take appropriate share of natural resources. Step-by-step. What are we being called to "force quit" so that we can continue to follow Jesus' call, Jesus' mandate: to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captive and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the jubilee year? For God all things are possible. Jesus is looking at us to see if we walk away or not.

¹ Sarah Augustine and Dan Peplow, *The Land is Not Empty: Following Jesus in Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery*, (Herald Press, Scottsdale, PA: June 2021). The next three paragraphs are summaries of Sarah's words and ideas.