

## Turning the Corner

Mark 10:17-27

What does it mean to follow Jesus? Someone told me it means being able to describe the back of his head. In the Gospel story of his encounter with a certain wealthy man, Jesus described what the back of his head looks like -- what it is like to follow him. Jesus was starting on a journey when a man ran up, knelt down, and blurted out "Good Rabbi!" Jesus countered, "Only God is good." The man was seeking a *quid pro quo*. He gave Jesus an honor and expected Jesus to treat him as special. But Jesus didn't play. Wealth and power had no special privileges with Jesus. All people stand equally before God. The rich, in fact, may be more in need of God's grace than the poor.

It was a pretty radical idea for Jesus' time -- radical for today as well. The man believed he was cool, keeping the whole law, and completely fulfilling what the Law was intending -- what God wanted. He thought he was really loving God with the full measure of his heart, soul, mind, and strength -- and fully loving his neighbor. He missed the cold, hard reality in that culture that his wealth directly connected to the poverty and suffering of the poor.

The man was deceiving himself. We deceive ourselves today when our nation consumes a vastly disproportionate amount of the world's resources and ignore that it leaves less for others. When a few take most of the pie, there is little left for others. Jesus' tells us to see this consumerism as greed. Notice it! Understand that God is all about noticing inequity, then working to correct it

The Gospel story says a curious thing. Jesus loved that man, the rich, young ruler. Something in his sincerity touched Jesus, but he lacked the freedom to follow Jesus. He was unable to let go of other allegiances, other sources of meaning or security, and follow Jesus. Is it just bad to be rich? Will that keep you out of heaven? No, that not what Jesus was talking about. He was also not talking about heaven, the Kingdom of God, as immortality -- life after death as eternal reward. Think of the Kingdom of God as being in sync with the divine life here and now.

When our faith and trust is in money or what money can buy, then we can't afford to get on board the *Gospel train*. In our living, we are shaping values that shape us. When our faith journey is a habit of religious practice and no more, we run the very real risk of following the example of the rich young ruler -- and we fall into the entrance line for heaven just behind the camel vaulting through the eye of a needle.

So what is the corner we need to turn for our lives to be good? Let me share some of my story by way of illustration. I grew up in church. My father was a minister -- an Army chaplain -- until he retired when I was twenty years old. Every Sunday we were in church and in Sunday School. I was involved in youth group and other aspects of church life. And it's not at all that I hated it. Most of my friends were there. It's just what we did! I have the feeling that my children would probably say the same thing.

When I was eight years old I got baptized -- partly out of fervent desire to please God and partly because everyone I knew was doing it. Soon after being baptized and joining the church, I did what every teenager tries to do. I began helping in the nursery so I wouldn't have to sit through the sermon in church. But then, around age fifteen, I began to question and to want something more from my religious faith -- to take it more seriously and have it mean more than an eight-year-old's faith. At age sixteen, I made a public rededication of my faith and my desire to follow Jesus and began to be a leader in the church.

As a minister, my profession has been wrapped up in my faith journey. It has been me the time and tools to sort out what I believe and the opportunity to share the journey with many people. It has also tended to put me in the role of apologist and salesman for the Christian Church and it didn't take long to discover that role is not for me. I have always found myself drawn to different voices and other perspectives. I've been fed by minority voices in the Christian tradition -- even non-church wisdom.

I have learned to trust in the vision I saw more than the template I received or the way church was supposed to be shaped. I found myself drawn to creative non-conformity (i.e. misfits and left outs in and out of the church). And I've gradually become convinced that's what Jesus did as well. And I've listened to new voices within the church who helped me find my own unique voice: Borg, Spong, Fox, Brueggemann, O'Connor, and Tillich.

I have found an expression of genuine ministry through theater, through classical and popular music, through inviting difficult questions, and even through play. I have found Christian identity through exploring Judaism and Islam, and even through some new-age spirituality. I've decided that my tendency to be this way is due in part to all the moving around I did growing up and also to the ecumenical religious climate of the military culture. We didn't know the difference between being Baptist, Methodist, or Presbyterian. So I arrived in professional ministry completely predisposed to seeing all Christians as one and Jews and Muslims as pretty close -- without any sense of God as condemning anyone to a place of eternal punishment.

My mom's death, at the beginning of my ministry, in conjunction with other family illnesses and deaths, reinforced my desire, my sense of call, to help people cope with grief and loss -- try to make sense of life. That led to more than twenty years as an associate pastor, most of those at one church. When I felt the strong desire, and even the sense of call, to be their senior pastor, that church decided wanted someone else -- maybe more conventional.

All this led to a shrewd career move to leave home and head west to the middle of the country, and become the first installed pastor of a new church. This was a church with an attitude about what church should be, pretty rigid ideas about what congregational leadership meant, and with no real guarantee of surviving any length of time. But here you are and here I am and want to tell you how this process is changing my life once again -- how I'm turning a corner.

Three experiences have helped clarify and give impetus to the changing in my life. The first has been the *Ask Jack* series. This experience really began at church camp back in 2004 when I did an *Ask Jack* segment there. I've continued the process during the past four summers wrestling with challenging questions and in conversation with a challenging congregation who were also clearly wrestling with the implications of these questions. In the process, I have heard lots of pain, fear, and even hope. Gradually, I have clarified my own views and have come to understand how meaningful those views are for you to hear. I'm learning to trust those views and my understanding. I am also challenging myself to be more honest in terms of those implications and beliefs for my own journey and the direction of this congregation.

The second experience was my father's death three years ago. As I walked through this process, I felt all those experiences I was having and the decisions I was making were beginning to coalesce in terms of who I am and what my life and its meaning is all about. After the funeral, my step-sister, who had spent lots of time with my dad in his process of dying, told me she had been so aware of his energy around me during his funeral. Her words felt very powerful to me.

A year later, at a family wedding in Atlanta, the same step-sister brought me a *message* from my dad -- something about nearing a breakthrough in my life. This was not so much a breakthrough in understanding, beliefs or issues, but embracing the implications of my life journey, respecting my voice, and trusting the value of my calling. This breakthrough was in terms of speaking out to try to change world by changing the church beginning here in my life and with Crossroads. Then, more recently, I have come to experience the *breakthrough* message as a “turn the corner” message and I began to know what that meant for me.

The third experience that has given impetus to the changing for me has been the financial crisis of the past two years. It has shown me how easily the crutch of trusting in financial security can be taken away. It has challenged me to re-examine where my security lies, what I really believe, and how deep my commitment is to follow Jesus – and really see the back of his head every day in my life. That is exactly what Jesus was calling us to do through his encounter with the rich young ruler.

This is not a story about the evils of having money and of being rich -- or even middle class in America. Money can be a wonderful tool for ministry and social justice. It's also true, and (more likely, that our relationship with money will interfere with our commitment to follow Jesus. And it's not just money, but the whole culture of status, power, acceptance, and control around it. Father Richard Rohr reflected the message of this parable:

Whenever St. Francis saw anyone in need or want, he transferred his mind so that person was Jesus himself. But though he had laid aside all envy, he could not be without envy of the poor. Now is that like us? Is that an upside down world or not? Are you and I envious of the handicapped, the poor, those on the edge, the marginalized? No, we join everybody else and look down on anybody who isn't grand and normal, healthy and heterosexual, white and mainstream like we think we are. So you see, we have not been turned on our heads by the Gospel. Now is the time that Christianity must ask this question: Is our real belief in the Gospel of Jesus or is it in the honor/shame culture of our countries? (Richard Rohr, adapted from *Francis: Subverting the Honor/Shame System*)

Are we following Jesus or are we following the crowd of our cultural values? Is the church following Jesus or are we just doing what seems familiar and what we think will get us accepted?

Jesus' invitation to turn the corner and follow is not easy, not by a long shot. It is impossibly hard. What's more difficult than a full-size camel squeezing through the eye of a tiny needle is to experience the power, joy, and abundance of life in God while hanging onto a reliance on money, power, and status quo to find meaning and feel safe. What do we do to turn this corner, honestly to follow Jesus? A great way to start is to decide how you will make the prayer of St. Francis come to life in your life.

Where there is hatred, sow love.

Where there is injury, offer pardon.

Where there is doubt, choose faith.

Where there is despair, look for hope.

When there is darkness, be light.

When there is sadness, trust in joy.

Seek to console more than to be consoled, to understand more than to be understood.

Focus more on loving than on being loved because it will be in giving that you receive, in pardoning that you will be pardoned, and in dying to the priorities of our culture that you will be born to eternal life. (adapted from Prayer of St. Francis)