

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond VA

October 11, 2015; the 20th Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31.

What Is Possible?

Jesus embodied God and God's truth, and he also taught those around him so that they could better understand -- better understand God, the mission Jesus was on and calling them to, and better understand what relationship with God would mean for their lives.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus' closest friends and followers were often confused, and confused for good reason---Jesus talked about God and God's kingdom/reign, and what being in right relationship with God looks like, in ways that were different, strange, not in keeping with the cultural and religious norms of the day.

And, yet, there was something about Jesus, what he said, how he said it, how he embodied it...there was truth and power in his words...people kept coming to him and they still do.

Today we are presented with the story of man who comes to Jesus seeking answers, or the answer, to life's most important question. Maybe he did not know that it was *life's* most important question, perhaps he thought it was primarily about life after death.

Jesus teaches the man that eternal life starts in this life, that it is experienced in following the Way of Jesus now.

This man is rich, in Luke's gospel he is called a ruler, Matthew's Gospel calls him young.

This is a person who is used to getting what he wants; used to having the resources that he needs to accomplish his goals.

He calls Jesus “good” and immediately, Jesus questions him.
 “Why do you call me good?” What are your motives? “God alone is good,”
 Jesus states.

Perhaps the man thought Jesus would simply confirm that he would inherit
 eternal life, after all, the man was keeping all the commandments.
 What more could he do?

John Dear, an internationally known voice for peace and nonviolence
 (expelled from the Jesuit Order in 2013, and is now priest of the
 Catholic Diocese of Monterey California), wrote a book entitled,
*The Questions of Jesus: Challenging Ourselves to
 Discover Life’s Great Answers.*

Rather than first answering the man’s question about how to inherit eternal
 life, Jesus asks him why he called him good.

Dear writes, “Most of us play little mind games to keep God under control.
 We try to trick ourselves into thinking that we can manage God, that
 we can keep God in a box, that we can keep God at bay...Is the
 rich young man trying to flatter Jesus?

Does he really believe Jesus is good? Or is he trying to manipulate and
 control Jesus...”¹

Whatever the man was doing and thinking about Jesus, even if he was
 sincere, Jesus turns his world upside down and inside out...not
 giving him the answer he expected: *yes, excellent, you have
 kept all the commandments, eternal life is yours...but*
 instead challenges the man to put all his trust in
 God in a way that is shocking.

Dear describes the shocking news of the Gospel: it is that, “God cannot
 be tamed. God is not some pet that we can pat on the head
 periodically through the day saying, ‘Isn’t this nice?’
 Rather, God is out of control. God is wild, God is way beyond us.”²

¹ John Dear, *The Questions of Jesus: Challenging Ourselves to Discover Life’s Great Answers*,
 Doubleday, Random House, An Image Book, Epub, 2004, Loc 340 of 4799.

² *Ibid.*

Jesus' answer must have seemed out of control and wild: "go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me'."

When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

"What?"

"Wait a minute...that was not the answer I was expecting"...we can imagine the rich man said.

Have you ever been surprised by God like that?

At a time of decision or choice, maybe even a crossroads in life, and you hear, you discern, God calling you to act in way or do something or not do something...and it comes as a surprise?

What is God calling us to do right now that goes against all common sense and the way we are used to living our lives or seeing the world function?

The Gospel tells us that the man went away grieving.

Almost everyone who interprets this story says that the man is grieving because he was not willing to give up his money and his possessions, but it could be that he was grieving having to give up his money and possessions, knowing that he would, in order to follow Jesus.

We ask God, "where is life for me?"

As we discern the answer, we may well grieve having to let something go in order to live into the life God is calling us to live, now, today, as we move into the future with God...we may grieve letting something go even if we are excited about following God's call to us.

When I discerned that I was *not* in fact called to give up all my possessions and join a convent, I grieved not being able to live that

sort of life with it's focus on prayer, silence, monastic
community...briefly, and then I was called to Holy
Comforter, to be with you, and it all made sense.

One may be called to give up all possessions to follow the Way of Jesus
or one might be called to give up an idea of life that seemed right,
what both have in common is the call to let go of control...the
call that we all have to trust God, rather than our ability to
make the world be what we want through our
money

or our influence or the force of our will.

Soon we will be promising some of our money to God's ministry through
this church,...this is what we call pledging...and while making
a pledge to support the ministry we share is a practical
matter...without our pledges our church would not be
here, certainly not in this form...so while a practical
matter, it is also a spiritual practice.

By giving money away, we demonstrate that money does not rule our lives,
that we know we can't control everything through our own resources,
that in fact our security and our safety come from God.

This is why I hope everyone will make a pledge this year of any amount.
Turning in a pledge card is an act of freedom and an act of trusting God.

Everyone has a call...everyone is important to God; the details, the
decisions, the directions we go, matter to God and have an impact
on lives, on communities, on the world.

What crazy, shocking thing is God calling us to do?

It will always cause us to depend on God more, trust in God's promises to
us, what God calls us to do will have a positive impact on others
even when it seems it might just be about us to start.

When Jesus told the disciples that being rich would not get them or
anyone into heaven, and that in fact having wealth can be a
stumbling

block to spiritual growth...the disciples were shocked...how

can this be, it makes it sound impossible.

But Jesus was clear, what seems impossible, and is in fact not in a person's control, is not impossible for God.

As God's children, our call is to live into impossibility as best we can, trusting that God will act to bring about God's reign...and we help, when we live into impossibility.

With all the recent and on-going shootings in our country finding a way to end this violence seems impossible.

When I think about the gun violence in our country, on our college campuses, most recently, I wonder what crazy thing God may invite us to do to help end this violence...it may seem crazy to many to be a person or a community of peace in a world that some see as so scary that the answer to gun violence is to arm everyone, all the time, everywhere, so that we can kill the next disturbed, mentally ill shooter who comes our way.

How can that be the answer?

I can't imagine Jesus giving that as the answer.

For many in our country, possessions include guns...if our country as a whole were to give up guns, what would we be grieving?

On this controversial topic, I will say, as I often do...I certainly don't have the answers or even the slightest idea of how to solve the problem, but I do feel that we as a Christian community are called to ask the hard questions and engage in conversation with others about such topics---as we did, as a church community, two years ago for about a year.

We considered what our policy would be regarding guns.

In the end, we came up with a policy about weapons as a whole stating: "The presence of weapons on the church's property is inconsistent with the church's traditional role as a place of peace, safety, and holy sanctuary."

The entire policy can be found on our website.³

Some of us thought this would an easy question for us, but it was not, it

³ <http://hoco.org/policies.htm>

was hard, but we worked through it with God's help---with God it was possible to deal with this question within our community.
And that is a start.

Jesus asked a lot of questions...did he always know the answers?
Well, since Jesus was working with people, who had and have free will---God's gift to us---Jesus could not have known, and does not know now, how we will answer.
And our answers matter, since we are God's hands and heart in this world.

We are here today because we know that we need God, and because we know that God is calling us to be a part of something great through the Church, and because we love God and want to share with each other this weekly chance to thank God for all that God gives us.

As well, we are here to ask the hard questions.
We are here to listen as the Spirit helps us discern the questions God is asking us; and to listen as individuals and as a community for God's call to follow the Way of Jesus.

I will conclude with another quotation from John Dear; this is found at the top of his website.
His ministry is primarily about peace as it relates to disarmament, but as we hear these words, we can also think of how allowing God to work with us, form us, transforms us into those who trust God and seek peace in all ways, and seek to follow the Way of Jesus.

"The key to changing the world and pursuing justice and disarmament is to allow the God of peace to disarm our hearts, making us instruments of peace, and leading us together on the road of peace."⁴
Amen.

⁴ <http://www.fatherjohndear.org/>