

Going Down the Road Feeling Bad
Mark10:17-31 (10Oct21)

“The man’s heart fell to the ground. He hung his head and walked away.”

There’s a lot in this Bible reading, not least because it seems to be a word that cuts into us, deep into the marrow of comfortable North American lives (Heb4:12).

This particular phrase catches me: “The man’s heart fell to the ground. He hung his head and walked away.” It’s grabbed me since it didn’t have to be that way.

The man might’ve instead heard Jesus’ invitation to give his possessions and property to the poor of his village as an exciting idea, a joyous opportunity, inspiring possibility. Rather than feeling it as a deficit, he might’ve anticipated receiving satisfied smiles, the gain of relationships and reciprocity, of those who would return to meet his own needs.

The thing is, we presume that the man’s reaction is justified. We also figure it would be sad to walk away from our stuff. Our dominant initial perspective seems to be shaped by rugged individualism of self-security and late-stage capitalism notions of winning. We should probably at least make a side note that that wasn’t the cultural setting of ancient Palestine, where this man having land and property would’ve been exactly seen as cheating peasants, and so he wasn’t as blameless as he claimed.

For economics being a fairly new science, Jesus cuts to the heart of things both then and now. We have dedicated ourselves to our own system, to earning so we can—if not hoard, at least—acquire, dedicated to jobs so we can pay off homes and vehicles, putting ourselves into it so we can draw back out in retirement. And so our initial perspective may likely be wariness or worry that Jesus wants us to give up what we work hard not to give up.

But it didn’t have to be that way. Rather than cutting deeply, and our hearts falling to the ground, we could be cheerful givers.

It’s interesting that this isn’t all that religious.

In spite of the man’s question about eternal life, this is real-world here-and-now kind of stuff Jesus addresses, of just distribution and responsibility. We know in stereotypical fables that Ebenezer Scrooge is unhappy as a miser and joyful when he discovers generosity and helping others. Similarly, I read this week that about 80% of Americans are bothered by wealthy people and companies not paying “their fair share” of taxes. We agree with the concept, and teach our children that life is better with sharing.

So why is our initial reaction so reluctant, so convinced it’s hard and sad? Why is it as difficult as the odd image of a moose fitting through the eye of a needle to convince us of what should be obvious?

It’s fortuitous that we wound up with that translocation of the odd image. The decision to use the new First Nations Version for our Bible readings came because of Indigenous People’s Day and some actions of our First Nations and the MCC group, and was a decision before seeing what the readings were for today.

But it meant that we also were given a verse translated “take all your possessions, invite the poor of your village to come, and have a giveaway.” The term “giveaway” shows another cultural context, one which might not have shared our initial reactions.

In many Native American cultures, the emphasis at celebrations is on giving, rather than receiving. At parties, instead of the guest of honor *getting* gifts, it’s an opportunity for them to give away cherished items. In this passage, Jesus wouldn’t have to be coercing something strange, since it was already the way to live.

This alternative understanding of how or why we own property also makes the language of most land acknowledgments striking, including in recognizing MCC property as previously the home of Ho Chunk peoples. I’m curious if that defaults to our own cultural perspective in saying we took *their* land, since they wouldn’t have seen themselves as owners, but been part of an interrelated shared environment, of all receiving, all giving away.

Ray Buckley, who is a Lakota/Tlingit person and a United Methodist, portrays interactions in the shared environment where “the four-legged [creatures] and those that can fly gather for council to discuss the needs of the two-legged (human beings). In an attempt to meet the needs of humanity, they offer the most precious parts of themselves. In the end, it is the Creator who chooses to give away the greatest gift for humankind—the Son of God.”*

Besides showing the character of our generous, benevolent, giving God, this is a nice and honest vision of how we are unavoidably in relationship. Even if you went off and lived “alone” in the forest, you’d still be dependent on the trees giving their wood for your heat (as well as your oxygen) and plants or animals to feed you and so on. You’re daily releasing your elements back to be recycled, and if you don’t wind up sealed in a cemetery vault, you’ll return your remnant for future use.

If you’re not ready to look forward to or celebrate that yet, we can presently participate in joyful giveaways. At Bible study on Monday, Doug Johnson talked about deciding they have enough and so setting up donations to share distribution of their retirement income. And Robin Thurow, when I was visiting in the hospital this week, talked about her eagerness to connect her grandchildren to our sharing activities at church so that they’d know how much they have. There’s joy in these things.

I’d be happy to invite you into the joy of sharing, including as we’ll be hearing soon about pledges for next year. Even if your initial reaction is that that’s just grubbing for cash, I don’t hesitate to extend the invitation for your generosity, because I do believe you’ll find joy in it. Especially if you’ve felt you need to cling tightly to what you have and worry about having enough, it’s worth trying to release that strain.

If that still feels coercive, I’ll point out that in this reading, it says Jesus loved the man. That’s not at all dependent on what he’ll decide to do with his money or property. Jesus loved the man. Jesus loves you. Not because you’re good or follow the

commandments or even his invitations. I’m not sure your sharing could change that, making Jesus love you more or less. That perspective would remain transactional, trying to keep count rather than recognizing God’s overflowing goodness.

Nevertheless, I’ll repeat the invitation to share, to give away, because it certainly seems you’d be missing out on the benefits of some joy and some real abundance in community. It doesn’t have to turn out with you going away heart-fallen.

*cited at <https://bmyart.wordpress.com/2007/12/27/native-american-give-away->