



## *Round Hill Community Church*

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### **Sermon: October 11, 2009**

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#### **The Posture of Freedom, Robert B. Culp**

Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

As you well know, there are critically important moments in life when big questions are asked, and when huge decisions are made. Sometimes we are aware of the importance of the moment, but I suspect that usually we are not. Indeed, more often it is later, sometimes much later, when we are given to see how important that moment was – long ago – in the unfolding drama of our own lives.

Somehow, those critical moments seem to come when we are struggling with life's biggest and most searching questions – where to go to college, what job possibilities to explore and accept, whom to marry, what friends to have, where to live, what to do with the rest of my life so that my passions and interests somehow intersect with human need in terms of a calling.

Those moments can be very difficult. In struggling with resolutions, we wish more than anything else for clarity, not ambiguity ... for a clear path into the future, not a vexing maze amidst a dense forest of choices and questions. In many respects, those moments take us out of our comfort zones and create a significant personal crisis, because they invite us to become, in some way, a new person.

The unnamed man in Mark's familiar text this morning is right in the middle of one of those challenging, uncomfortable, and promising moments, and he is asking one of the most important questions that can be asked – "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Perhaps because the man has observed Jesus and has felt the impact of his healing and teaching ministry; or perhaps because he's had prior conversations with Jesus and has experienced in Jesus a depth of understanding and the freedom tied to his knowing the unforced rhythms of grace; or perhaps because he has come to the end of his own rope of clever striving and is empty inside ... this man is yearning to discover what he has to do to live deeply and fully, passionately and meaningfully, now, in this lifetime, and to live in such a way that has the

significance of eternity about it.

It is one of the best questions, perhaps even “the” question, that all philosophy and art, all literature and religion attempt to answer.

In response to his question, Jesus tells the man, “You know the commandments,” and then he proceeds to reel off more than half of them – you know: “Do this, do not do that, honor your father and mother,” and the man replies, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.”

It’s then that something very interesting happens. Jesus looks at him, and he considers carefully what the man has just said. He knows that this man has not given voice to those words pompously or impatiently, but almost as a confession: “Teacher, I have kept the Torah all my life, which is how I know that it’s not enough. I have amassed great wealth, which is not enough either. I am a rich man – rich in material possessions, rich in respectability, rich in obedience to all the commandments and the Law. But none of those things I have has given me the kind of life for which I thirst. What do I need to do to inherit eternal life, the kind of life that is lasting and real and true?”

It’s no wonder that Jesus loves this man – loves his integrity, loves his moral commitment, loves the fact that he is asking the greatest question in the world. This man has come to the end of all that he can do for himself, and even to the end of what his faith community and his society can do for him. All that is left for him to do, as someone has noted, “is to kneel at the feet of a street preacher with eyes like stars and ask him what to do.” This man is a true seeker, a pilgrim who has kept God’s Word and has remained true to his own self, a faithful child of God who has translated his beliefs into a life of genuine obedience to God ... and a man who knows that there is something more, and knows whom to ask about it.

Jesus looks at the man, but he does more than merely look at him. He looks at him with as much compassion as he has ever looked at any single soul within the course of his ministry ... the man who was blind, the woman about to be stoned who had lost her way, the child filled with a destructive, crippling spirit. And Jesus veritably ached to touch this man at his feet and make him whole.

“You lack one thing,” Jesus begins, and I can only imagine what that man might have felt inside as he anticipates what Jesus is going to say – “Finally! Here is the One who can see past what I have, to what I don’t have, and who will help me find what I’ve been missing. Whatever it is, I will do it. Whatever it costs, I’ll pay for it. Whatever it demands of me, I will earn it. I’ll do anything to add the prize of eternal life to the treasury that is mine.”

But it turns out that it’s not a matter of addition for this man. Rather, it’s a matter of subtraction.

“Go, sell, give, come, follow,” Jesus says. Five imperatives Jesus intones that are de-

signed to melt the lump in this man's throat and untie the knot in his stomach by dissolving the heavy burden on his back ... the bundle of things that keeps banging into the top of the doorway into the heart of God and prevents his entrance into God's company and the inheritance of eternal life.

Barbara Brown Taylor explains Jesus' words this way: "They are an invitation to become smaller and more agile by closing accounts on earth and opening one in heaven so that his treasure is drawing interest inside that tiny gate instead of keeping him out of it. It is a dare for him to become a new creature, defined in a new way, to trade in all the words that have described him up to now – wealthy, committed, cultured, responsible, educated, powerful, obedient – to trade them all in on one radically different word, which is "free."

You see, when this man (who is hungering not for fame or comfort, wealth or power, but rather is yearning for meaning, significance, life) ... when this man meets up with Jesus, he is called to let go of all that is encumbering him, and to stand up straight and assume the posture of freedom. As he looks deeply into this man's eyes, this man's heart, Jesus tells him what he needs to hear, and his words create a holy disturbance within.

The man is utterly stunned by what Jesus says. He's appalled and shocked, and slowly he backs away, walking off into history with a heavy heart ... and grieving ... because, as Eugene Peterson translates it, "He was holding on tight to a lot of things, and was not about to let go." It's the only time Jesus issues an invitation in the gospel of Mark that fails to bring forth a positive response. This man is the only wounded soul who somehow refuses to be healed.

It's as if Ebenezer Scrooge, who had seen all those wonderful ghosts of Christmases Past and Present and Future, had still turned back to his dreary life in the counting house, destined for chains and immortal agony like his partner Jacob Marley. For a brief shining moment, the man in Jesus' presence glimpses the possibilities, and he sees what it might be like to cast off his worldly tethers and to become a member of Jesus' little group.

But then the curtain drops, and the man at Jesus' feet cannot make the decision to let go of all that he holds onto so tightly. So, he goes away sorrowful.

In the meantime, the disciples of Jesus are amazed ... amazed because Jesus has just challenged one of their society's fundamental assumptions: namely, that money is a sign of God's blessing. They are astonished, not because they are rich (because they certainly are not), but because of the way Jesus cuts through one of the most basic conceptual assumptions of their culture, and the way Jesus invites people, all people (rich people, poor people) ... to think in new ways about their lives, and what they are here for, and what is possible to do with their lives.

Now, what do you think? Is this a tale about money? Of course, it is. It hints broadly

about how money can contaminate us and can infect us to the point of causing us to yearn for it too desperately, or use it too manipulatively, or value it too highly. But this tale is not just about money, for none of us can buy our way into heaven or earn eternal life ... no matter how many commandments we keep or how much good we do. For, as someone has said, the kingdom of God is not for sale.

Rather, the kingdom of God is the greatest gift God gives, and it is given to us in lavish ways according to the calculus of God's love ... reflected in Bethlehem's birth, seen in the healing ministry and teachings of an itinerant rabbi, witnessed in the shadow of a cross, viewed in the shimmering glory of an empty tomb, and heard in the gracious, but demanding invitation to taste life's goodness and fullness. The catch is, though, that we have to be unfettered and free to accept the gift. We cannot accept such a gift if our hands are wrapped tightly around what we possess, if we are otherwise engaged, if all our rooms are full. Indeed, we cannot follow the Lord of Life and experience his gift if we are too comfortable where we are and somehow tied down by what we have.

That may be the reason the man went away with his head hanging low and his posture stooped over ... for he understood that he was not free. Poverty frightened him more than his heavy attachment to his possessions. Somehow, he could not believe that the opposite of rich might not be poor, but free.

The Lilly Foundation has done a lot of research on how we relate to money, our resources, and what exactly we derive from it. Lilly's surveys showed that even the mention of money stirs up complicated emotions, and that when asked if they have enough money, Americans, regardless of their income level, usually respond by saying, "I think I need a little more."

The researchers found that the reason is not that we are all materialists, somehow enslaved to the market dynamic of spend, accumulate, earn more, spend more, accumulate more, and so on ... nor that we think money can buy happiness. What most people want is abundant life – full, meaningful, and happy lives. They found that rather than materialism, most people are driven by anxiety ... by the worrisome wonder as to whether they will have enough money to be secure, to have homes in safe neighborhoods, to send loved ones to the right schools, to pay for extra security systems, to save some extra in case of illness or emergencies.

The research team called this "SUV Theology." The researchers indicated that most people don't drive an SUV because of its size or status, but for reasons of safety and security. They concluded that oftentimes they, and perhaps we, are caught not so much by selfishness and consumerism as by fear and anxiety. The philosopher Jacob Needleman observed that "Hell is the state in which we are barred from receiving what we truly need by the value we give to what we merely want."

Rather than using this man's stooped-over, fettered posture to deliver a critique of materialism, Jesus offers an invitation to this sincere and honest man who's asking one of the greatest questions in the world. It's an invitation to let go of the strong hold, driven by fear, that he had on resources, and to trust God for his salvation and well-being. What Jesus offers this man, and offers to us along the course of our own faith journey, is the opportunity not only to discover abundant and eternal life in the freedom of God's love, but also the privilege of living for something more and better and larger than personal security.

It's a great moment that is full of challenge and promise. It's a moment we share in this stewardship season when the needs and opportunities we face together are great and when, in this transitional time in our church's history, the challenges are wondrous to behold. My hope and prayer is that we may grab hold of Jesus' words to his disciples, and dare to let go ... and dare to trust in loving and generous ways that "for God all things are possible."