

“WHATEVER—LET IT GO!”  
Mark 10:17-31; Hebrews 4:12-16  
First Presbyterian Church, Marshfield, WI  
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People look at death differently across cultures. Some believe the dead may actually need things from this world in the next. I remember performing a funeral for one of the elderly ladies who was a member of the First Presbyterian Church of Mesa, AZ, and she was a member of the Pima Indian tribe. When we got to the cemetery there was a truck parked near the grave with some of her possessions in it. The Pimas believed that a person needed the same things in the next world that they had in this world. The lady who had died was a committed Christian, and she knew that wasn't the case. Her family and extended family weren't, however, fully committed to that point of view. Thus, to make sure all the bases were covered, after the funeral service, her belongings were placed in the grave along with the casket and then covered over. Earthly possessions were important to these people, even though they often had very few. Perhaps that is why they seemed so important.

If there were anyone who knew the non-essential nature of the things of this world, it was Mother Teresa. She was born in what is today Macedonia. As a young girl, she felt God calling her to be a nun. She joined the Sisters of Loreto in 1928 at the age of 18. The next year she arrived in India. She taught for about 20 years in the order's convent school in eastern Calcutta, but she became more and more concerned for the poor who surrounded her. In 1943 the Bengal famine brought misery and even death to many, and then in 1946 there arose a new round of Hindu-Muslim violence. In that year she experienced what one writer calls a “call within a call.” She felt she had an obligation to minister directly to the poor and oppressed of Calcutta. She received some basic medical training, and then dived into the slums of the city.

Her first year was extremely difficult. She had no funding and no support. She had to beg for food and supplies, and she recounts that more than once Satan tempted her to return to the comforts of the convent. Her troubles led her to identify more intensely with the poor, the sick, and the dying. She at one point said that a beautiful death is for those who have lived like animals to die like angels—loved and wanted. In 1950 the Vatican approved a new order called the Sisters of Charity with Mother Teresa as the founder. Out of her work has grown a world-wide network of hospices, orphanages, and leper houses.

Her spiritual life was also a challenge. Most of her life, she could not find the connection with God that most of us just naturally assume we have. We can find the Lord, lean on him, and draw strength from him and the Holy Spirit. Mother Teresa seems to have lived in a spiritual desert. She prayed daily and fervently, but there wasn't even an echo returning to her to be heard. For a brief period in 1958 the Spirit settled on her, and she felt God's love and approval, but only briefly. The silence returned with the ever-present feeling of aloneness. It seems that God wanted her to wholly identify with the people to whom she was ministering who could not find God in their lives. It was as if she was with Jesus on the cross when he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The message of Mother Teresa to her followers and to us is that we have to lay it all on the line, if we want all that there is to have. We have to let go of everything that ties us to this decaying, transient world. This injunction just reflects the message that Jesus preached and embodied as he laid himself on the altar and gave up his life that we might have life like we could never imagine. Mother Teresa learned that sacrifice is the privilege of discipleship.

Now, let's turn to where we started this morning—with the story of the rich young man. He is overflowing with enthusiasm. He rushes up to Jesus with a burning question, but what he really wants most is validation for his “good life.” He begins by addressing Jesus as “Good Teacher.” Jesus first reaction is to say, “Flattery won't make it. Only God is good. Don't try to butter me up. You are enthusiastic now, but have you really stopped to count the cost? You know the commandments.” He then ticked off five of the Ten Commandments, the ones about adultery, stealing, lying, cheating, and honoring one's parents. The young man said he had done all those things. Note that four out of the five are negative commandments. They told him what not to do. Jesus knew this young man's heart, and he loved him because he could see the potential that lay within him.

He also knew where his weakness lay. He challenged him by telling him that he needed to do one thing. That was to give away all that he had to the poor and follow him as a disciple. The end of the story is that the young man turned away and left, because he had many possessions. Jesus then turns with sadness to his disciples and tells them that it easier for a camel go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to get into heaven. His disciples are stunned, because it was common knowledge in Jesus' day that wealth and ease were the **rewards** that God gave to people for a righteous life. The problem with the young man, however, was that he had been doing all the DON'Ts and none of the DOs.

It had never really crossed his mind that the religious life was not just a matter of avoiding doing bad things. It had never occurred to him that with all his wealth he could DO some really positive things to make life better for people. The concept of stewardship was not on his radar. He thought that his avoidance of prohibited things made him righteous. But the cost of discipleship is not that cheap. If we want to really follow Jesus, we have to be willing to let everything go that we may own, including our lives, and do something. Jesus held nothing back. Neither can his disciples. Peter as always sticks his oar in as he notes that he and the other disciples have given up everything to follow Jesus. We're good followers, right? Jesus affirms that whoever gives up all for him will inherit eternal life, but he notes also that troubles will follow them and that they shouldn't expect an easy road. Peter ultimately found that out as he was crucified upside down in Rome for being a disciple of the Lord. He learned that sacrifice is the privilege of discipleship.

Some of you may have seen the movie “Becket.” Thomas Becket was the friend and companion of King Henry the 2<sup>nd</sup> of England. They drank together; they caroused together. Henry came to believe that he could trust Becket with anything that needed to be done. He made him Chancellor of England. As tensions, however, arose between the crown and the church, Henry believed that he could control the church in England, if he appointed Becket as the Archbishop of Canterbury. Becket, according to the movie, was deeply troubled by this thought and begged the king not to make that move. The King persisted anyway, and got his way, but

what he had done finally enabled Becket to discover his real self. His first step as Bishop was to joyfully give away everything that he owned to the poor, and then to stand on the side of the church when the secular powers tried to invade what he felt was the church's domain. As we all know, his willingness to stand against Henry ultimately cost him his life. He was cut down after conducting a mass in Canterbury Cathedral. He had let everything go in service to God. He had learned that sacrifice is the privilege of discipleship.

Why are people willing to give up so much? Why were Mother Teresa and Becket willing to lay it all on the line? I think the answer to this question lies in the Hebrews text for today. Remember what it said?

**15** We don't have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He's been through weakness and testing, experienced it all - all but the sin.

**16** So let's walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help.

Jesus is the great high priest in this passage. He is wholly God and wholly human. He has experienced everything that we experience, but to a depth that we can never comprehend. He faced the direct confrontation with the depths of evil. It tempted him to lay aside who he was for the supposed higher good of feeding and ruling the world, all if he would only submit himself to those powers of the underworld. Instead of submit, he faced every pain, every sin, every hurt, and every evil that existed in the universe. He submitted himself to all of them, hanging on to his life until he could say with finality, "It is finished." Only then did he die. We, for our part, when confronted with pain and suffering, can withstand it to a point, but when it gets too great, we have the blessing of passing into unconsciousness. He didn't have that option, not if he were going to bridge the gap between the Father and us. That gap was created by us, but bridged by Jesus, so that we might live in the light of eternity, now and forever.

Of course, his death is not the end of the story. He rose early that next Sunday morning, overcoming everything that he and we have suffered. He now sits in the presence of God as our advocate, our defense attorney, our friend, and Lord and King. He is so very different from the gods of the Greek and Roman worlds that had surrounded him. He was even different from the understanding of the God that most Jews worshipped. For the Jews, God was different and distant. He was Holy, above sharing and understanding human experiences. Among the Greek philosophers, their gods were also different. The Stoics believed in a god who was above and beyond feeling. Hence, that god could not empathize with the human condition. Similarly, the Epicureans believed in a detached god who could not understand the human condition.

On the other hand, the Christian God was a God who identified with the suffering human world and with human beings, because he had been there and done that! Having experienced our pains, sorrows, and troubles he could be a God with the capacity of mercy. He had been where we are. Because he knows our lives and us, he has the capacity to forgive us. When it comes right down to it, we go to a God who has been here with us. We are not strangers or foreigners from a strange land to him.

I read a story about a young woman who had grown up in Canton, China, but then moved to her native land of Scotland. The day that word came that the Japanese had captured Canton and wreaked havoc there, her father found her in anguish and sobbing. Why? Because the taking of Canton translated into people she knew. It meant a home in which she had lived. It meant friends whom she had known. It meant a nurse who had taken care of her. It meant a school to which she had gone and children she had known. She had been there and knew what it was like. Likewise, we worship a God who has been here, a God—Jesus—who knows us, because he has been here. He is also the God whom WE know, because he has been here. That is why Mother Teresa and Becket and Peter could let it all go. They worshipped a God who knew them, and knew them by name. Once again, they learned that sacrifice is the privilege of discipleship.

Let me end with one final story. I've had the opportunity to travel to India a couple of times, and on one of those trips I was introduced to a young man who had been a Hindu, but had become a Christian. In India, religion, vocation, family, friends, opportunities for marriage are all tied together in one large ball. Break that string of connections at any point, and you no longer have any identity or place in society. It is all gone. That is what happened to this young man, when he became a Christian. The consequences of that action were far reaching.

First, his family ejected him from their circle. They even held a ritual funeral, for to them he was dead. He was forbidden to return to his home or to have any contact with parents, grandparents, or siblings. When his mother was hospitalized with a serious ailment, he was forbidden entry to the hospital. He had to resort to sneaking in the back door to get to see her, which he did several times, and as any mother would be, she was delighted to see him. I asked him if it were worth it to him to have converted. His answer was an unequivocal, YES, because he knew the Lord who knew him, because Jesus had been here. Once more for him, he knew that sacrifice was the privilege of discipleship.

It is my hope that we will have the courage to come to the living Christ more fully and more whole heartedly than we have ever done before, and with this young man we will be able to affirm that sacrifice is the privilege and consequence of discipleship.

Amen.