

The Riches of Neediness 10-13-24

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

Psalm 22:1-15

Hebrews 4:12-16

Mark 10:17-31

Have you ever heard the term “cognitive dissonance”? The technical definition of Cognitive dissonance is “a psychological state of discomfort that occurs when a person has conflicting beliefs, attitudes, or values. It can also happen when a person's beliefs don't align with their actions.” We experience this all the time. We know exercise is good for us, but it’s hard to get off the couch to do it, so we live with guilt. We would never deliberately harm someone else, but we struggle to know how to help others, so we do nothing, and we live with that shame. We know stealing is wrong, but we don’t rat out our friend for stealing and we feel conflicted about it.

Most of us live with a certain amount of cognitive dissonance, resulting in guilt and shame. And, in our relationship with God, our response is typically to hide. Just like our grandfather Adam, our guilt causes us to run for cover. We don’t want to be exposed. We say we believe in God’s love and forgiveness. But sometimes we feel the fear of exposure more powerfully than the hope of grace, so we try to ignore it. They say a comfortable lie is better than an uncomfortable truth. So, we live with the cognitive dissonance created when our beliefs don’t line up with each other or with our behavior. If we really trusted grace, we wouldn’t be afraid to be honest with God about our inner struggles. We would follow the admonition of the author of Hebrews, trusting God and boldly approaching the throne of grace with complete candor. Unfortunately, many of us choose instead to hide our deepest struggles and ignore the pain they cause, allowing our distance from God to grow.

Today, in Mark's gospel, we are faced with the problem of wealth. Jesus clearly taught about the evils of wealth. But what is it about wealth that is so problematic? Well, let's define it. The word wealth speaks of money and possessions, but it also means "needs". It refers to the things that people need to live. Wealth and riches imply an abundance of these things, more than what is needed, but the basic fact is that anyone who has the ability to provide for his own needs, anyone who is not in want or, who is not "needy" enjoys some degree of wealth. This whole passage contrasts the rich with the poor. The poor are defined as being in need. They do not have the ability to provide for themselves, so they experience neediness. Certainly, there are degrees of both wealth and poverty, but if we have extra food in the pantry and extra clothes in the closet, we are probably tipping the scales towards being on the side of wealthy.

So, what is the problem with having more than enough of what we need? In today's story, Jesus wasn't making an argument about the needs of the needy. He wasn't appealing to this man to give to the poor so they would be less needy. He was concerned about the man in front of him. Did you hear the first part of the story, when the man approached Jesus, telling Jesus how perfectly he'd kept the law his whole life? One of the hallmarks of cognitive dissonance is an overemphasis on justifying and rationalizing one's behavior. But Jesus wasn't bothered by this man's arrogance or his discomfort. Jesus just looked at him and loved him.

Based on this story, I think the problem with wealth, with non-neediness, is that it keeps us from genuinely experiencing the love of Jesus. This man came to Jesus to prove why he should be granted eternal life and learn what else, if anything, he still needed to accomplish. He was clearly smart, powerful, and capable. He didn't come asking Jesus to grant him eternal life. He wanted to earn it.

The problem with wealth is that it deceives us into believing we can earn it. In the gospels, the poor and destitute are always elevated above the rich. But all of us really only have one true need, the love of God. God's love is free, we pay no entrance fee to get into the kingdom. The only thing we must do is come asking for it, believing we can genuinely do nothing to earn it, trusting God really does want us, just as we are. There is something truly powerful about the posture of a beggar. I remember when I first started coming to The Episcopal Church and experienced the eucharist for the first time. I was used to an evangelical model where I remained sitting while someone passed me a plate of crackers and I would take one for myself before passing it along. But Episcopalians get up out of our seats, we walk forward and hold our hands up in this beggar's posture, asking Jesus for something we cannot do for ourselves. It's a profound experience of acknowledging our neediness and our trust in God's love.

We, the wealthy, living here, now, with all we need and more. We live with the cognitive dissonance of praying the Lord's Prayer and asking for daily bread when most of us have never faced the prospect of genuine hunger. We read scripture telling us how nearly impossible it is for us to enter the kingdom because of our wealth, but we were born in America and the alternative to wealth in our modern world is not acceptable because it means we'd be relying on the government and our friends to provide for us. So, we live with the cognitive dissonance of systems that feel beyond our control.

The solution to cognitive dissonance begins with honestly naming these warring tensions. It's easier to ignore them. But once we face them, we have two choices. First, it is possible God is asking us to change our behavior. I don't know, maybe God does want you to sell everything you own, or perhaps less dramatically, to give more away than feels comfortable. I don't know. Ask God, I don't want to be in the middle of it. The second possibility is to remain in the tension of the discomfort. Having answers and feeling pious

is a type of wealth because it illustrates power and ability. Living without clear answers, so long as it's an honest and ongoing conversation with God, is an expression of neediness. And that is where God wants us, wanting Jesus, trusting God's love, not just behaving well enough to try to earn our way into the kingdom.

One of the things that wealth keeps many of us from, is genuine honesty before God. Wealth is a tremendous protection and shield for us from the suffering that the poor cannot avoid. Both Job and the Psalmist illustrate something for us that might help us gauge our own hearts before God. These two authors had suffered tremendously, they had endured unimaginable loss, alienation from their friends, and their grief made God feel distant in a painful way. Both these authors railed against that distance. They cried out in their anguish, they made their voices heard, they shook their fists in frustration and beat against the doors of heaven. Have you ever yelled at God? Have you ever experienced such torturous torment that you let yourself be that honest with God? We allow ourselves to be most free, most unscripted, with our closest friends, the ones we trust the most, the ones whose relationships are worth more to us than just allowing them to fade away. Eventually God answers Job, but God never chastised these authors for coming towards God with their complaints. God wants our honesty. If our veneer of an appropriate relationship with God keeps us from honesty with God, then it's possible that our wealth has protected us from experiencing the poverty of spirit Jesus invites his followers into.

May we be a people blessed by the riches that poverty provides, bravely honest enough to be unburdened by the discomfort of cognitive dissonance, trusting God to love us and provide for us in all the places we find ourselves to be in need.