

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

October 14, 2018
The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 10:17-31
Amos 5:6-7,10-15
Psalm 90:12-17
Hebrew 4:12-16

Each time we read, we get a different insight. Certainly the teaching of Jesus is the same but how we apply that teaching will vary. So, bear with me this morning as I go down a path that really matters to me.

Every generation has its identifying factors – those things that our parents detested that we adored. The music we listened to. The clothes we wore, the way we talked, how we wore our hair. Growing up we would hear comments like, “That’s not how I did it when I was your age” or maybe they would just roll their eyes and say, “kids these days” or “things were so much simpler back in my day.”

Those identifying factors become each generations standards of fitting in, of being accepted. We all curate a world for ourselves that clearly states who we are and that we are cool enough or pretty enough or smart enough. We buy things. We wear things. We do things that define us as successful and having it all together. We overachieve. And...we acquire stuff...lots of stuff. When we do all of that well, we start to feel good about who we have become; or at least that’s what we tell ourselves. Generation after generation so the story goes.

When I read our text from Mark, I realized this has been a universal struggle. Here is a man who has followed all of the rules of his day. And he has a lot of material things. From what we can tell, this is a man who probably knew how to fit in. Maybe he was up on the latest trends and had all of the right friends. He was certainly successful. Yet, even in his success, he wasn’t satisfied. He still wanted more and so he asks Jesus how he can obtain one more thing. He wants eternal life. Maybe he had heard about it. Maybe his friends were talking about it. And...so it was simply something he had to have.

Here is the problem. Jesus sees his desire to get more, to be more. Jesus sees the struggle and he has compassion on this man. In fact, not only does he have compassion, Jesus loves him. And says, yes, you do lack one thing but it’s not what you think.

You know the rest of the story...Jesus tells the man to sell everything he has, to give the money to the poor and then come and follow him. The one thing the man lacks isn’t one more accomplishment or one more pair of shoes. It’s not even the key to eternal life. No, Jesus says, what you need is to know you are loved and to put that love at the center of your life above everything else.

As I read Mark this time around, I couldn’t help but think of the world our young people are growing up in and it makes Jesus’ directive to come and follow him so timely. It terrifies me to see what our children have to navigate (and I have three teenagers at home)...not just the

pressure to live into a certain image, but the unrealistic expectations that are put upon them to be liked, to have the right clothes, the right friends, the right social media profiles. The stakes have become so high and so unattainable that our children are growing up with a never ending, 24/7 struggle to be accepted.

Sure, the struggle has always been there...even Jesus had compassion on this all too common desire to have it all, to fit in. But Jesus also knew this never ending cycle of having more would only lead to unhappiness and discontent. Because none of us will ever measure up to the world's standards no matter how hard we try. And Jesus knew that the only real thing to provide true happiness and contentment was to put faith at the center of our lives. It was true then and it's true now.

But, what does that really look like, especially for our youth? The more I thought about it, and thought about my own kids navigating the world, I began to wonder how do you encourage a young person to put their trust and hope in God when so many other things are vying for their time and attention? How do you help them to slow down and not worry so much about meeting everyone else's goal of success? It's challenging and I can't say I have figured it out. But I know they need it. I know it would make a profound difference in their lives as they embark upon this generation's demands to fit in and to be good enough.

But the reality is that the stillness of prayer can't compete with the rapid communication of Snapchat. The hymns we sing aren't as catchy as the latest tunes on Spotify. Taking communion may not get you 100 likes on your Instagram story.

Here are some difficult facts. Studies have shown that the increased time our young people are spending on social media, comparing themselves to others, trying to cultivate the perfect image for others to approve of, that they have found themselves more depressed and with a lower sense of self-esteem than ever before. They often have problems sleeping. They are at increased risk of being bullied. Many have higher rates of eating disorders, anxiety, and insecurity. The more time they spend focused on external markers of fitting in, the more removed they become from the things that can truly bring them joy. It's what I heard termed as a culture of comparison and it's epidemic.

Researchers point out, these aren't new struggles in the lives of young people. Every generation has had the same kind of pressures to fit in. It's simply that social media increases the quality, quantity, and scale of the normal pressures of growing up. So when I say helping our young people to follow Jesus matters now more than ever, it really does. Maybe I'm on my soapbox this morning but as I read about the rich man, all I could think of was how this story is always with us.

Like the rich man, we want to overachieve. We want to have it all. We want to get it right. No wonder our kids are having a hard time balancing it all.

And if Jesus could look each of them in their eyes, our children and our grandchildren, he would look at them with love and say to them that you don't need all of that – you don't need this culture of comparison that you have found yourself in. Jesus would say, no one else can provide you with wholeness but me. In fact, Jesus said that our faith will make us whole. He didn't say your stuff will make you whole or your achievements or your popularity. Yet, it's all of those other things that our society has convinced us that we should believe in.

Let me also say this...When Jesus says to the man, sell everything you have, he isn't talking about doing away with his accomplishments or his wealth. Or, if he were talking to our kids today, I don't think he would tell them to do away with their cool shoes or the Instagram accounts or to find new friends. He is simply saying to reorient your life around what truly matters. He's saying turn to God, let your life be a reflection of God's love for you.

So I want to say this to our young people...When things get hard, when you are struggling to keep up, when you feel you don't fit in...don't look to all of those other things to make you feel good about yourself. Because they will never provide you with what you truly crave...that knowledge that you are unconditionally loved just as you are. Remember Jesus first loved the man in our story just as he was and then Jesus said come and be with me.

Hollis asked me the other day...why does faith matter? How does faith change your life? I responded that it matters because I believe I was created with a divine purpose. That God created me as well as each and every one of us with a purpose...a reason to be here...a perfectly designed vision of who we are to be. And that reality for me changes my life. It means that no matter what society may tell me about myself, no matter how much people may make me doubt my worth or my ability, that God's love for me and for my life rises above all of the other influences.

That's what I want our young people to know...that faith changes everything when you remember that you were created with a purpose. And that knowledge reorients all of those outside voices that say you can only be good enough if you meet some random set of criteria of having the right things or looking a certain way or achieving a certain amount of accolades. You can reorient those voices and know that you have already met the mark in God's eyes.

That's why faith matters. That's why Jesus wanted the rich man to come and follow. Because he had a purpose that all of his wealth and all of his accomplishments could never fulfill. God's purpose was so much bigger and yet so much simpler than he ever imagined.

Come and follow. Amen.