

“A NEW WORLD”
Mark 8:27-38; 10:17-22
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Politics, sex, and money: the three things the preacher is not supposed to mention from the pulpit in some congregations. Sermons should be about religion, the other taboo topic in social settings. In those same congregations, religion should focus on individual faith and specifically address the question of how one gets into heaven. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” as the rich man asks in our first reading. But first, let’s talk about Peter.

Peter tells Jesus, “You are the Messiah!” Jesus sternly orders the disciples not to talk about it, but it’s not from some prohibition against talking politics in church. Unlike us today, he understands the political nature of Peter’s affirmation. He knows that Peter is anticipating the day when Jesus will restore the kingdom to Israel, when he will replace Caesar.

So Jesus understands the political and social significance of the messiah in Peter’s mind. He knows about the danger if word gets out, but he’s also not that kind of messiah. So he explains about the trip to Jerusalem, the suffering and death that is coming. Like the disciples, we almost don’t hear the part about the resurrection. We may not like this part about the crucifixion, but in hindsight we know that this death is “for us,” that it is a death for the “sins of the world.” If we believe that the forgiveness of God allows us to go on with life as before, we are as mistaken as Peter. We’ve ignored the message: “Repent, and believe the good news. The kingdom of God is at hand.”

I want to look at these two encounters, the one with Peter and the one with the rich man, in the context of this gospel message. The first word, “repent,” tells us that Jesus understands that people don’t see things properly because they’re looking the wrong way. They need to turn around. “Get behind me!” he tells Peter, because Peter is trying to lead. We don’t have his words, but he’s telling Jesus that he is not going to suffer and die. He’s going to Jerusalem to flex some muscles, to put those Romans in their place, because that’s what the Messiah is supposed to do!

Thomas Slater describes Peter this way: “Peter had a prosperity gospel of his own, based on worldly standards, not heavenly ones. He associated righteousness with power and privilege. He believed wealth and social status were synonymous with piety and sanctification” (p.246). In other words, Peter joined this party for profit. And when he takes Jesus aside to rebuke him, he crossed the boundary from expectation to entitlement.

You can’t blame him really. He’s been watching Jesus and Jesus has demonstrated some pretty impressive powers: freeing people from their demons, healing diseases, curing deafness and blindness, calming the wind, and multiplying the loaves. We can forgive Peter for not seeing the difference between empowering people and conquering people.

But what Peter wants isn't good news. He wants to be in control in a world of winners and losers. And that's the only world he sees, because he's facing the wrong direction. Turn around Peter. Look over here! See the world where God has come near. See the world where power is about giving, not taking; where life is about helping, not harming; where reconciliation replaces vengeance; where wealth is shared, not hoarded. Turn away from that lust for power, that sense of entitlement. Turn away from exclusivity to mutuality.

Repent. That's our focus this Lent. We have to talk about the things we're reluctant to turn our backs on, but it's every bit as important to focus on what we see when we turn around. That's where the good news lies. That's where we see God entering the world.

Peter couldn't take his eyes off the win/lose politics of his day. He doesn't stop trying to turn Jesus into a winner. He's determined to ride Jesus to the top, and in the end, it breaks him. It feels like it's breaking us. There's so much to repent of in the politics of our day: the constant lying, distortions and deceptions; the influence of corporate and personal wealth; the gerrymandering of districts that undermines our system of representative government, laws that wrongfully restrict or impede a person's right to vote.

It's hard to blame people for opting out, but that isn't helpful. Jesus didn't opt out. He didn't set out to conquer the political powers, but he did set his eyes on Jerusalem, center for the political potentates. The triumphal entry as we inappropriately call it sometimes was not a demonstration of power, but it was a political statement, a popular yet humble entry into the fray. He tossed the money changers from the temple courtyard not as a hostile takeover move. I mean, is there any doubt they were back the next day. He taught daily in the temple, stood up to the testing of the scribes and Pharisees. He turned their eyes to the people they were failing to serve, to the sick, the lepers, the poor, and the oppressed. And they killed him for it. This is what he meant when he told his disciples to take up their cross and follow him. The powerful will not thank you for this kind of behavior. For me, this means I don't vote my own interests in the voting booth. I already have a home, but I vote for politicians interested in solving our housing crisis. I vote for people committed to easing the burdens of the poor. In general, I vote for politicians who talk more about giving than taking.

When we repent of politics as usual, we have to move out of the winners/losers world. I'm doing well enough in that world, but it isn't right. It isn't where God is. It isn't where Jesus leads. If I turn around, I see a world where healers, therapists, social workers, even politicians are engaged in the work of empowering people, of building communities that nurture, where everyone matters, where the earth is respected. It's a new world, not the old world with bodies shifted.

It's a world that Jesus invites the rich ruler to step into. The first step: sell what you own, give the money to the poor. What must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus points him to the law, specifically that part of the law that relates to human relationships. He doesn't tell him: "Believe in me, and you will be saved." He tells him to look to his neighbor. When the rich man claims to have done all that, Jesus looks at him and loves him. Is he picking

up on the rich man's sincerity? Does Jesus think he has done well by his neighbor? Whatever he sees, he stops treating this encounter as a test of his orthodoxy and tells this man the truth: "Your money's holding you back!" Scott Bader-Saye puts it this way. "To love the man, Jesus must tell him the hard truth, that his wealth is in his way. So Jesus invites him, as an act of love, to unload his burden, to give away his wealth, to free himself from that which has come to bind him, even though he has no idea he is so bound. This is love. This is the truth – and it is hard to hear" (p.310).

Carter Heyward sets Jesus' challenge in the larger economic context. She writes, "Even if he has kept all the laws and commandments of Judaism, he must give away his possessions and discard his economic power and privilege to follow Jesus" (p. 204). She cites this passage in her discussion of the sin of "capitalist spirituality." Now I don't want to get bogged down in some critique of capitalism, but there are always going to be problems when money captures the heart of the soul. And so there are things to repent of with respect to the economy: the growing gap between rich and poor; profits that do irreparable harm to the earth; blaming the poor for their poverty; applauding the rich for their industry.

But as we're trying to say in this season of Lent, this is only half the story, turning away from the things that bind us. We're asking about what we see when we turn around. Jesus held up the vision of the poor for the rich man, but he loved money more than the neighbor who happened to be poor. And so he went away sad. What must I do to inherit eternal life? What must I do to see the nearness of God? Believe the good news. Take up your cross.

If you want to find your life, shift your focus from self to others. Look at your neighbor. Hear God's call to community, to living for and with others. If you want to follow Jesus, you need to turn away from accumulating power and toward sharing power. Jesus isn't about shifting the players around. He doesn't want to sit on Caesar's throne. He wants to gather around a table of love, where one person's abundance is directed toward the needs of another. He's about a new world, a place where God is welcome, a place where the sick are tended, the anxious are encouraged, the hungry nourished, and the distraught comforted. Repent, believe the good news. The kingdom of God is at hand. Jesus invites us to turn around and see for ourselves. Amen.

Feasting on the Gospels: Mark. Edited by Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson. Westminster John Knox: Louisville KY. 2014.

Heyward, Carter. *The 7 Deadly Sins of White Christian Nationalism: A Call to Action.* Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham MD. 2022.