

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Proper 23
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St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
October 10, 2021
Amos 5:6-7, 10-15
Psalm 90:12-17
Hebrews 4:12-16
Mark 10:17-31

Holy Interruptions, Intergenerational Interactions, and Obstacles

As our gospel begins today, Jesus is setting out on a journey. Where is he? And where is he going?

He is beyond the region of Judea where Jerusalem lies, in the area on the far side of the Jordan River from Jerusalem. It's an important area. In the desert wilderness near here is where Jesus and multitudes of others were baptized in the Jordan by John the Baptizer. And following his baptism, going farther into that rugged desert area, is where Jesus faced a series of struggles and temptations over a period of forty days and forty nights alone before beginning his public ministry.

This region beyond the Jordan River was called Perea in the first century. It was bounded by the Jordan River on the west and by the Jabbok River on the east. Do you remember the Jabbok River?

On the banks of that river, many, many generations before Jesus, his ancestor Jacob wrestled all night with a stranger, possibly an angel. Following this epic wrestling match, Jacob was wounded and would have a limp for the rest of his life. And, following this night of struggle, Jacob's name would be changed from Jacob to Israel. It's the beginning of the heritage of the Jewish people.

Does it matter where Jesus is? Yes. Once again the gospel of Mark is using geography to tell us significant things. Jesus is in a region that is redolent of struggle in Jewish history and in his own life, both in his personal temptation struggles and in his ministry.

In our gospel last Sunday while in this area Jesus taught about marriage and divorce and the struggles around them and about the confusion and struggle with his own disciples regarding allowing children to come to him to receive a blessing.

Where is Jesus? He is in a region associated with struggle in Jewish history, in Hebrew scripture, and in his own life. This clues us in to be on the lookout for others who may also be struggling in this region known for struggle.

It seems that after the teaching we heard last week, Jesus is ready to move on. Where to? Where is he going?

The answer is in the verse after where our passage ends today. And next Sunday's gospel will pick up three verses after where today's stops. So, you won't hear the destination of this journey read aloud at the gospel reading, but it's important. The answer to where Jesus is going on this journey he is setting out upon as gospel today begins is Jerusalem. It will be his last journey.

Does it matter where he is going? Yes.

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"As he was setting out on a journey," Mark says, "a man ran up and knelt before him." Both these actions are remarkable. Grownups didn't run in the first century: it's undignified. A grown man ran up and knelt before him: a sign of respect, a sign of wonder, a sign that someone is struggling and about to plead for something from the person before whom they kneel.

Someone else on a different kind of journey interrupted Jesus' departure.

Jesus allows the interruption. He doesn't blow the man off. He doesn't say he is running late and ask the person to make an appointment or come back later. Jesus doesn't ask the disciples to pick the guy up out of the dirt and haul him off to the side of the road so that he could pass by.

No. He allows the interruption. We might identify it as a holy interruption.

And, looking to Jesus, our model in all things, what might we learn from this?

When our schedules are too busy and our calendars are too full, we often rush right past the people who need us most or who might bless us most. And they are often the self-same people. Sometimes we can easily miss the greatest opportunities for growth and grace that God is providing for us if we rush right past: "very busy, gotta go."

How can we have more space and a slower pace so that we might be more aware of and open to these opportunities for grace?

I tend to think about this in terms of margins. If a page in a book has no margin, for me the printing is difficult to read. And the page seems much less inviting to me as a reader if the print goes all the way to the edges of the page. Just so, if our schedules have no margin, no space for holy interruptions, these opportunities are difficult to see.

To extend the idea of margins a bit more, we can think of our calendars in terms of portion control. I myself prefer to have some space around the edge of my dinner plate, space that enhances the presentation of what is on offer. So too, I find I not only prefer but I also need

spaces in my calendar that are not overscheduled. These spaces enhance what is scheduled and make room for what is unscheduled but of tremendous importance.

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Jesus allows the interruption. Embarking upon the most important journey of his life, he makes space for this encounter. He sees the person in front of him.

Who was that person? Traditionally, this man is known as “the rich young ruler.” Matthew, Mark, and Luke have versions of this story. All three of these gospels tell us the man was rich. Only Luke (Luke 18:18) says he was a ruler, a formal leader of some kind, and only Matthew (Matthew 19:20) says he was young. Taking these details together, “the rich young ruler” has come into being as a composite character from these three accounts.

In Jesus’ world, respect for one’s elders was valued. So, it’s not a huge surprise that someone younger than Jesus who is seeking him out as a great teacher would kneel before him. But it’s somewhat astonishing that a person of wealth and privilege and formal station who thus has a higher social standing than Jesus in some ways in that situation would come to him, run up to him, and kneel before him.

Something’s going on with this guy. This is the kind of struggling person we are keeping a lookout for in this region associated with struggle. This young person is struggling with how to know that he will inherit eternal life. “What must I do?” he asks Jesus. It’s a sincere question from a serious seeker.

Please note the operative word in his question is *inherit*: what must I do to inherit eternal life, not earn it. What we do and don’t do matters a great deal. But no matter what we do or don’t do, we can’t earn eternal life. It’s God’s gift to us, and God’s desire for us all to receive it. And for us to understand that eternal life begins now when we embark upon a life of fellowship and relationship with God, and it continues after we die.

In response to the young person’s sincere question, Jesus recites six of the ten commandments. The young person replies that he has kept all these since he was a child.

Mark says Jesus looks upon this young man and loves him. Loves him. Just as he is. In the midst of his struggle. In the middle of his perplexity.

Are we doing this? Are we engaging intergenerationally? Are we seeing people of different ages from us and in different stages of life from us just as they are? Do we love them how and where they are, with no agenda? Without projecting onto them what we would have done when we were their age or what we think we will do when we are their age? Do we receive people of different ages and stages of life than us as Christ and as Christ receives us?

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Meanwhile, back in Perea, region of struggle: *Here's what you lack*, Jesus says. *Go sell all your stuff and give the money to the poor. You'll have treasure in heaven. And then, come, follow me.*

Mark says the young person was shocked and went away grieving. Why? The answer Mark gives is that he had many possessions.

It's in Luke's gospel (Luke 12:15) where Jesus says, "Our life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions." Yet this passage in Mark surely puts me in mind of it.

Did the young man grieve only because he had lots of stuff, an abundance of possessions? Or was it more complicated? Was it perhaps also that to sell his possessions would be disrespectful to his parents who had passed to him the wealth with which to purchase these possessions? Did he perhaps inherit these possessions from his parents and forebears? Were they heirlooms that he could not bear to think of parting with? Did the weight of family obligations constrain his choices? Did he perhaps feel encumbered in ways he could not explain? Did his possessions in fact possess him?

St Francis of Assisi whose feast day we observed last Monday, October 4, famously gave back to his wealthy father everything his father had given him. He gave up all wealth, all possessions, all status, including his clothing. He stood naked in the square of Assisi where he was immediately received by the bishop of Assisi who hurried to cover him with his mantle: "You can't be standing out here naked no matter what kind of sign you are giving your father." It was also a sign that from then on Francis was under the direction and protection of the bishop, and he went on to live a life of voluntary poverty and to lead many others to do the same. He was, in effect, the rich young ruler of his day in the twelfth century.

This wealthy young person in the first century in Perea was not at that point in this story. I wonder about him. Did he later join up with Jesus in the growing band of his followers? Was he among those who ultimately walked to Jerusalem and watched what went down there?

It's important to note that wealth is value neutral. It's not inherently good or bad to possess wealth. Abraham, for example, had great wealth. It's what one does—or doesn't do—with wealth that determines whether it is an obstacle to a life in harmony with God and others. Do we use the wealth entrusted to us in living out our baptismal promises, to create a better world, to heal and repair the world, to relieve suffering, to strive for justice and peace, to respect the dignity of every human being?

For what may have been a very complicated set of reasons, the rich young ruler in this story went away grieving following Jesus' injunction to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor. What Jesus proposes presents an obstacle for him.

“How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God,” Jesus says. We might well substitute our own obstacles. “How hard it will be for those who value things more than people to enter the realm of God.”

“How hard it will be for those possessed by technology, for those enmeshed in family obligations, for those who find security in material possessions, for those dragging around emotional baggage, for those stuck in unhealthy relationships, for those addicted to anything, and on and on and on. How hard it will be for anyone who does not let go of their obstacles to enter the kingdom of God.”

What presents an obstacle for you, for me in our life of following Jesus? What is an obstacle for me may not be for you, and what presents as an obstacle for you may not be for me. What comes between the way we desire to be in relationship with God and what we find ourselves doing? What possesses us? Jesus asks us to give these things up not because all of them are inherently bad. He asks us to give up, to offer up as a sacrifice the things which are obstacles for us to be relieved of them, and to be honest before God about what those obstacles are.

Jesus invites us to live our “one wild and precious life” in relationship with God, unencumbered by anything that inhibits that relationship, giving up whatever our obstacles may be so that we can more fully live the life to which he calls us.

And, we have his promise, at the end of today’s gospel: no one who has given up anything for the sake of following him, for the sake of God’s good news in Christ, will be destitute. Everyone who has given up their obstacles will receive blessings innumerable in this life—along with further challenges and opportunities to grow—and will see when their life is changed by death that life in God never ends.