

“Going Around the Block,” 18 April 2010

The Bible passage for this morning needs a little set-up and explanation, I think. This story is found in three of the four gospels, with just some slight variations. Prior to the part we have, we read about a rich man (some refer to him as young and some as a ruler, but Mark just calls him “rich”) who came to Jesus asking about eternal life. Now there are lots of ways to interpret “eternal life” and “God’s kingdom,” which is also referred to in the part we have. The way I think of those terms is that the man is talking about how to get into a right relationship with God, and experience wholeness in this life and the life to come. Some would say that he’s asking how he can be saved. I suppose that’s one way to express it, but to me, that’s too narrow an interpretation.

At any rate, the man asks about eternal life, and Jesus comes back to him, asking if he has obeyed the 10 Commandments, which the rich man says he has. It’s then that our passage continues, with these words:

Jesus looked him hard in the eye—and loved him! He said, “There’s one thing left: Go sell whatever you own and give it to the poor. All your wealth will then be heavenly wealth. And come follow me.”

The man’s face clouded over. This was the last thing he expected to hear, and he walked off with a heavy heart. He was holding on tight to a lot of things, and not about to let go.

Looking at his disciples, Jesus said, “Do you have any idea how difficult it is for people who ‘have it all’ to enter God’s kingdom?”

Again, there are different points of view about what Jesus is telling the man he has to do. Some understand it as the need for him to give away all of his possessions, and that’s one way to see it. However, I think it’s something a little different. I believe Jesus is pointing out to the man that his wealth is in his way of a deeper more meaningful life that is enriched by a vibrant relationship with God. His focus is on his wealth, and not a connection with God.

Lamar Williamson, in his *Interpretation* commentary on the Gospel of Mark, puts it like this: “Its spiritual meaning is that we must root out of our lives whatever may hinder our following Jesus, such as lust, pride, and selfishness, together with whatever object or practices may appertain to them.”

I really believe Jesus is talking to all of us, whether we’re wealthy or not. He’s trying to make it clear that there are things that keep us from God, that get in our way of connecting more closely with God. Those are the things we have to become aware of and move out of the center of our lives. It may be money for some of us, but it could be any number of other things, too.

Maybe it’s like a story one of you sent me about a young, successful executive who was driving down a neighborhood street, going a bit too fast in his new Jaguar. He was looking out for kids who might dart out from between parked cars, and slowed down when he thought he saw something. As his car passed, no children appeared, but instead, a brick was thrown that smashed into the side of his new car! Angrily, he backed the car up, and jumped out, grabbing the first child he could get his hands on.

“What was that all about? What do you think you’re doing? That’s a new car, and this is going to cost you a lot of money to fix it!” The young boy who had thrown the brick was very apologetic, and said, “Please, mister...please. I’m sorry, but I didn’t know what else to do. I threw the brick because my brother rolled off the curb and fell out of his wheelchair and I can’t lift him back into it.”

Now sobbing, the child asked, “Would you please help me get him back in his wheelchair? He’s hurt and he’s too heavy for me.” Quickly and carefully, the man did exactly that, and watched as the two made their way down the sidewalk after thanking him for his help.

The driver walked slowly back to his car, and saw how noticeable the damage was. However, he never bothered to get the dented door repaired. He kept the dent there to remind him not to go through life so fast that someone has to throw a brick at you to get your attention.

Is that what some of us are doing? Are we moving so fast through life that there's never a pause, never an opening for God, or anyone else, to get through? Are we so busy running from one activity to another that we're missing the ways God is trying to reach us? Are we overwhelmed with long to-do lists and post-it notes filled with details we never get to?? Is our busyness so getting in the way that someone, God, need to throw a brick at us to get our attention?

What else is it that is keeping us from God? I suppose it's probably different for each of us, but I wonder sometimes if it has to do with being consumed with our own self-interest and self-promotion that gets in our way. Some might call that our ego, but another way to understand the word ego is that it's "edging God out."

Maybe we're so self-focused that we can't see beyond our own wants and needs; we can't see others around us who are hurting and in need of healing. All we can think about is ourselves. Maybe that's part of what's going on with the rich man in our Bible passage—he's just consumed with his own "stuff," and has no time to be concerned for others, let alone to reach out and try to help someone else.

There may be other things that keep us from God, too, and they may have to do with some inaccurate and outmoded concepts of who God is and what God is like, maybe due to something we've heard or had drilled into us by our families or even by former church experience. It seems to me that any image of God as harsh, unloving, judgmental and uncaring is really off base. We need to understand that any depictions of that kind of God that we might find in the Bible are really a reflection of the writer's experience of life, rather than a valid description of who God is. It's important to remember that the Bible is composed of a collection of writings by human beings, and not a divine record dictated by God.

The reality is that any depiction or image we hold of God is probably inadequate and limited. Nonetheless, I have to say that my experience of God is that of a Being who is all-loving and all good. God's will for us is a life

filled with goodness, but sometimes things happen in life that make it seem as though it's not so good. Those things are not caused by God, nor does God send lightning bolts to strike us dead because of the things we do. That isn't who God is.

I know that some of us may believe that God is all powerful, but I guess I've never quite seen it that way. I don't believe that we are puppets on a string, with every action controlled by God; rather, we are left free to experience life as it comes to us, and when difficult circumstances arise, as they do in the course of living life, I believe God gives us the strength and power to face them. There's a writer who has put this image of God into language that makes sense to me. Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his book *Overcoming Life's Disappointments*, quotes theologian David Griffin who wrote: "God is all-powerful, but God's power is not the power to control events; it is the power to enable people to deal with events beyond their, or even God's power to control." Perhaps his insights can help us embrace some new and refreshing views of God, and move away from any images that keep us from experiencing God's loving presence.

The basic truth is that each of us has some sort of block that gets in the way of our having a strong connection with God, but we've probably talked enough about the things that keep us from God. What helps us draw closer?

How do we, as the vision of The Garden states, "experience God wherever we are?" Where can we see God or hear God's whisper? Everywhere; everywhere. I believe God is in everything, and everything is in God. As someone has said, "There's not a spot where God is not." This understanding has only been reinforced with some reading I've been doing recently on Celtic Spirituality, which has long held the conviction that God is present in every living thing, and that all we have to do is to look and listen and we can experience that piece of divinity. More and more I've convinced that's true.

In her book, *FirstLight*, author Sue Monk-Kidd shares a story that is one of her earliest memories. She said that she was 4-

years-old and asleep in her room when a sound woke her up. It was, she said, a persistent sound of scratching on the window screen, and it was a rather ominous sound. However, she wasn't afraid, only curious about the magical nature of the sound. With all kinds of possibilities dancing in her head, she crawled out of bed and went to her parents' room, waking her mother. "Mama," she said, "There's an angel scratching against my window."

I can only imagine how I might have responded, had I been her mother. "Oh, that's just the wind. Go back to bed." Or "Don't be silly; there's no such thing." Sue's mother didn't do either of those. Instead, she seemed to sense that the ability to listen creatively to the world and to hear the humdrum and the familiar as sacred possibilities was a tender, fragile thing. Sue Monk-Kidd writes, "So rather than douse my first foray into holy imaginings, she put her blessing on it. She said, 'An angel? Wonderful! Say hello for me.'"

What a gift her mother gave her! And it's the gift that God is offering us. Can we hear the scratching on the window screen and hear God's voice? Can we watch the trees blossoming and see God? Can we hear a child's laughter and smile at the face of God?

I've often said that having faith is like looking at life through a new set of eyes. We see one another differently, and we see the world around us in entirely new ways. Maybe as we draw closer to God's loving goodness, we will see God everywhere we look—in every person we meet, in every word we read, in every song we sing, in every inch of creation, in every experience however significant or insignificant—in every part of life. God is there. I believe it. Do you?