

## **Dying to Self**

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Christ Episcopal Church - Towanda, Pa  
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### **Mark 10:17-31**

We are well along in Mark now and Jesus keeps reminding us that the Kingdom of God is at hand. His teachings increasingly challenge us as we hear them. They are fully counterintuitive and run counter to our systems of meritocracy. We desire assurance from Jesus like the wealthy man in today's reading.

He seems to have won in the game of life; at least in the culture of affluence and hard work.

He's wealthy, he's faithful, most likely upstanding in the community, yet Jesus has now set the bar so high suggesting that this man of wealth give everything away! We might think of this man as someone like Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk in today's world. Yet he's not only speaking to the wealthy but to each one of us.

Jesus is just asking too much, give it all away, leave your family, all that you know, abandon it all for the sake of God.

I was stunned this week to learn of the Facebook exposure of the executive approach of profits over people. Facebook has unlimited monies to develop its algorithms of Artificial Intelligence in order that you are presented with content that is strongly emotive, induces strong reaction, sparks controversy and keeps you hooked. This is their money maker, your attention. I am not a routine user of Facebook for many reasons. I also recognize its many benefits such as one of our own church's platform of communication. There is good content and information there. I am grateful for current up to date access as this vehicle.

A whistle blower who worked at the highest technical level of these algorithms of functionality and customization had to leave when she recognized that as leadership understood that young impressionable people, as well as many in society are at increased risk for mental health such as suicidal risk, anorexia, due to their product, As misinformation is

knowingly transmitted and societal disruption was being infused as a result, they chose to look away because their cause is profits over people regardless of a plethora of studies proving societal assaults. The greater good be damned! This scenario illustrates a corporate intention of deliberate exploitation for monetary benefit of its leadership. Success at the cost of human welfare and flourishing could not impress Jesus. There are many scenarios like this in our world today.. Radical individualism seems to be at an all-time high.

The Hebrew scripture today instructs that before God no creature is hidden. Jesus the great high priest has been thoroughly tested and thoroughly without sin. So that we, all humans faulty and not yet living into the fullness of God's intention can approach Jesus seeking grace and finding mercy.

I'll return to the theme of hope which orients us to this living into the fullness of God. Most of us are unable to fulfill the command Jesus is asking the wealthy man to do. Yet Jesus was instructing this man lovingly!

In seeking the gift of hope, we are saved. All who live in Christ are formed by the **1) Already** and the **2) Not Yet**. <sup>1</sup>This seems like an existential contradiction. We are already saved by God's action in the resurrection of Jesus. At the same time, we are a work in progress. We won't be fulfilled until God draws EVERYONE into the fullness of life. <sup>2</sup> How does this speak to the world view of market competition, exploitation, systemic injustices? This is why it is so hard for us to hear this lesson. We are born into a world of consumerism and competition as we climb our way up the economic ladder in our social ordering. We are usually winning or positioning as the cost of another often over and against another .

Let's unpack Jesus' instructive through three tenses:

- What we have already been given
- What we are growing into
- What we still have to yearn and faith for- that will be part 2 next week.

**Already** - In reality of baptism, when it comes to God- there is no shallow end to the pool. We are immersed in God and united to Christ -we are indwelling from the spirit from the start - remember the seal of chrism placed on the baptized: "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit of Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever"<sup>3</sup> It is one (won) and done.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Smith - *Faith in Maine Podcast - Seeking the Gift of Hope*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>3</sup> Book of Common Prayer - *Baptismal rite* - pg 308

All of Christian life is experiencing what we already have! Thomas Merton gave this reflection:

“In prayer, we experience what we already possess through our baptism in Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. You start where you are and deepen. We are already there!

Christ has given us everything but WE DON’T KNOW IT and we DON’T EXPERIENCE IT!

So we just need to experience what we already possess.

When seeking the gift of hope, we don’t expect to get zapped from above - God’s work with us and for us is an inside job. When we are seeking the gift of hope, we are seeking what we already have...which is the Spirit dwelling in our hearts - drinking from the wellspring of the Spirit.<sup>4</sup> “The water that I give will be a spring of water gushing up to eternal life - this is Jesus’ promise to the Samaritan woman (John 4:14)

We are already a hope filled people because we are a Spirit filled people.

**What are we to grow into?** - We need to draw on the source of living water. Let it struggle with our resistance. Let it have its way of healing within our negativity where fear makes us so vulnerable.

Contemplative prayer and Centering prayer are ways that I have found to develop this in practice. Through silence, we connect with God’s indwelling presence and action which dismantle the emotional programs of the false self and heal the wounds of a lifetime by addressing them where they are stored—in the body. The Holy Spirit assists us in a transformation of the heart which becomes liberation and inner change.<sup>5</sup>

We can use a metaphor of Spirit that Paul uses to help us - He teaches us that we experience the Spirit as a down payment or first installment. Paul was a businessman, an expert tent maker. He uses this secular term to drive home that we have indeed received this Holy Spirit but there will be far more to come.

We have received enough of it to carry on but we have yet to receive its fullness and develop and transform us. This fullness will not be complete until ALL have it. We work our salvation (Phillipians 2:2). What does this work look like for us in the meantime?<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>5</sup> Contemplative Outreach - The Welcoming Prayer - Silence Solitude Service

<sup>6</sup> Martin Smith - *Ibid*

Where does it point in terms of personal commitment, practice, service and compassion?

Jesus' pitch here is a charge for every person to transform their lives. This gospel reading takes us to the precipice of our faith. There is the question of committing ourselves to our own personal answer of who we think Jesus pulls us beyond the safety of looking up the answer in the creed or the back of the prayer book.<sup>7</sup>

I believe the metaphor which Jesus uses, a camel moving through the eye of a needle demonstrates how difficult it is to die to our self-imposed will. The camel passing through the eye of the needle is the dying to self. We are asked to give up our own wants desires, needs and preferences in order to respond to what God is calling us to do.

Laying down self-promotion and fear clears out our own agendas in order to let God direct our lives into a truer and deeper way of being. This was Jesus' own prayer to God in the garden of Gethemene: his own human and honestly articulated resistance to face his path. Here he responds, "Not my will, Lord but yours be done."

These teachings come from contemplative voices ancient and present, to include Jesus himself. Through silence we die to self-importance in recognizing our vulnerability- our worst failures, our grief and loss, and even our own physical diminishment. We sit before God in all our brokenness and without expectation. This is a spiritual discipline my friends which I find has been more beneficial than any psychotherapy. For you see **God in Jesus Christ IS** the divine therapist. Our lives develop compassion, forgiveness, and love enabling us to truly see our neighbors as ourselves.

This is what we are growing into as the body of Christ. This is the passage through the eye of the needle. I see the Spirit speaking and moving in the community here at Christ Church.

Let me close and let us say together the Prayer of St. Francis found on page 833 of the BCP:

***Lord, makes us instruments of your piece.***

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<sup>7</sup> Rev William Redfield *Sermon - Dying to Self* - Sept 12, 2012

***Where there is hatred, let us sow love;  
Where there is injury, pardon;  
Where there is discord, union;  
Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness light;  
Where there is sadness, joy.  
Grant that we might not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;  
To be understood as to understand;  
To be loved, as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive;  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
And it is in dying that we are born into eternal life. Amen.***

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