

“Practicing Pentecost: After Walking Away”

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Mark 10:17-31

The last couple weeks, I've been watching old comedy sketches in my spare time, the ones dating back to the 60s and 70s, featuring Jonathan Winters, Victor Borge, Foster Brooks, Flip Wilson and others. One of Wilson's characters, Brother Leroy, is leading a prayer service one Sunday morning, and it isn't going very well. People are unresponsive. When it comes time to receive the offering, Brother Leroy passes the collection plate, but it comes back empty. He passes it again. Same thing. Empty. Brother Leroy then goes before the people and says: “Now, I know that you all want this church to progress. This church must progress.” But no response from the congregation. Brother Leroy shouts a bit louder: “Now, before this church can progress it has to crawl, this church has got to crawl.” And the congregation starts to feel something, and they yell back, “Make it crawl, Reverend. Make it crawl!” Brother Leroy continues: “After this church has crawled, it's got to pick itself up and start to walk, this church has got to walk!” And the people yell back at him: “Make it walk, Reverend. Make it walk!” “And after this church has walked, this church has got to get up and run, this church has got to run.” “Make it run, Reverend. Make it run!” And then Brother Leroy says: “Now, brothers and sisters, in order for this church to run, its gonna need money; it takes money for this church to run!” And the people yell back, “Let it crawl, Reverend. Let it crawl!”

The facts about the man we meet in today's gospel reading are a little sketchy. St. Luke's version of the story indicates that the man was a ruler. Mark suggests that he is an older man, and Matthew repeatedly refers to him as “the young man.” But they all agree that he has lots of money, but it is not his money that interests me today; it is his movement. All three gospels agree that the man turns away with sadness. Mark says that Jesus loved him the moment he laid eyes on him. So, I suspect Jesus turned and walked away with sadness as well. The guy sounded like a potential follower, didn't he? Having kept every commandment, he asked Jesus what he needed to do to receive eternal life. And Jesus, answered him, in effect, “You must first decide what you really want in life, because what you value is what you will end up loving in this life and the next one.” And that's where the conversation starts to go haywire. All three versions of the story suggest that his possessions somehow distracted him from the essential things one should value. Getting de-possessed is one way of dealing with our dis-tractions. But surely, surely Jesus knew that becoming a different person would take time, a lot of time. He only needed to look over at his followers to remind him of that!

“Give all you have away,” well, there's an attention getter. Sure, wake the guy up! But I want to believe that Jesus was prepared all along to meet this guy half way. I want to believe that Jesus would have worked with him like any good parent or teacher works with a willing subject, would have let him crawl first. After crawling, sure, then walking and maybe running one day. But, instead, the man underestimates his own inner resources and leaves. And if Mark is correct, if Jesus really loved him, Jesus likely worried about running him off like that. This abrupt ending makes this story one of the saddest stories I know.

In the mid-sixties, Dr. Leslie Weatherhead, who for over two decades served Temple Methodist Church in London, wrote a very helpful book entitled, *The Christian Agnostic*. Every time I turn to it, I sense a degree of sadness Weatherhead felt for the people he had known through the years, people who were attracted to Christ's unique way of living and loving, but could not honestly "sign on the dotted line" on every stated belief of the organized church. In his preface he writes,

"Don't exclude yourself from the fellowship of Christ's followers simply because of mental difficulties. If you love Christ and are seeking to follow him, take an attitude of Christian agnosticism to intellectual problems, at least for the present. Leave the rest in a mental box labeled, 'awaiting further light.' And in the meantime, join in with us in trying to show and spread Christ's spirit, for this is the most important thing in the world."

I worry that too many people give up too quickly and walk away from Christ, and in doing so walk away from life in general. Distracted by things or unconvinced of their inner strength, I worry that some people walk too quickly from whatever seems too challenging, feeling that they don't have what it takes to succeed, or that nobody is really interested in crawlers, beginners, because only runners are welcome. Next time you (or someone you meet) feel like walking away, remember that following Jesus is "living a way of life," not learning a theological system, a set of doctrines or arcane rules. Next time you feel, or meet somebody who worries, that it is too difficult to follow Jesus, please remember that he did not require complete intellectual agreement on everything. Like life itself, a journey of faith is a mystery to embrace and a relationship to enter not a problem to solve. The Christ I know will welcome anyone who sincerely desires to follow him. And He is willing to grant us the freedom to listen, to consider, to ponder, pray, follow and ultimately believe only the things that seem true to us.

Test what I am saying in light of your own experience of being in love. You cannot write a creed or statement of belief about a person when you first meet him or her. Why? Because you don't know much about a person at first. I've known Juli for over 40 years, and I can still remember meeting her for the first time. But only after living with her, loving her and working out our differences could I possibly write on paper what I know to be true about her and our relationship. Saying "Yes" to God, revealed in Jesus, is like falling in love, I think. It is what I wished the man had realized when he talked with Jesus that day. At least, I wish he would have said, "Can I have a day or two to think about this?" And maybe he did. Maybe he did think about it. We are told that he turned and walked away sorrowful, but I like to believe that he did not walk away empty handed. In a way, maybe he found what he was looking for. He was looking for something he didn't possess, and he met Someone who possessed more than he could give away. And the One who looked lovingly on him awaited his return, as he waits for us whenever we walk away. I really believe that. And you?