

She told me right upfront. 'I know you,' she said. 'You're not going to be happy if you don't accept this child as the gift of God that he is. Do what you need to do to be a good mother. God has given you lots of gifts and resources. God means for you to use them for this baby.'

"What my mother said wasn't easy to hear. It wasn't what I thought I wanted to hear. But it was what I needed to hear. She was right. Joe has changed our lives; enriched our marriage. He's been a precious gift. Initially I thought he was the worst thing that happened to me. It turned out, he was the best thing in my life."

Sometimes it takes a teacher, a really good teacher, to bring out the best in us, to tell us, not what we think we want to hear, but what we need to hear. And when we dare to listen, dare to follow, then we're able to rejoice.

Rejoice, despite all the difficulties, Jesus has told you the truth. He's stripped you down of all the meaningless stuff to which you cling. He's drawing you through that narrow needle's eye toward the way that leads to life, and that eternal.

With God, all things really are possible!

To the praise of the Name that is timeless and the Love that is boundless.

Amen!!

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A Message from Mark!

Top Teaching

11th October 2009 - Pentecost 19

Scripture: Mark 10:17-31

Prayer *Lord Jesus, we come to church in order to be with you and learn from you. Therefore, during this time, help us to focus; enable us to hear what you have to say to us. Teach us. Even when your teaching is hard to take, give us the grace to receive your word, to grow in our faith, and to deepen our discipleship. Amen.*

A very successful businessman had a meeting with his new son-in-law. ***"I love my daughter, and now I welcome you into the family,"*** said the man. ***"To show you how much we care for you, I'm making you a 50-50 partner in my business. All you have to do is go to the factory every day and learn the operations."***

The son-in-law interrupted, ***"I hate factories. I can't stand the noise."*** ***"I see,"*** replied the father-in-law. ***"Well then you can work in the office and take charge of some of the operations."*** ***"I hate office work,"*** said the son-in-law. ***"I can't stand being stuck behind a desk all day."***

"Wait a minute," said the father-in-law. ***"I just made you a half owner of a profitable business, but you don't like factories and won't work in a office. What am I going to do with you?"***

"Easy," said the young man. ***"Buy me out!!!"***

Sometimes it's hard to tell the good news from the bad. In scripture, it's sometimes difficult to know whether you're dealing with the good news of grace or the bad news of judgment.

“Grace,” said Martin Luther, **“often wounds from behind.”** That which you thought was a harsh divine judgment, turns out, in the topsy-turvy world of the gospel, to be an act of God’s love. Sometimes grace and judgment are the same things. Sometimes, the only difference between good news and bad news is where you happen to be sitting when you get the news!

Of course, you don’t have to wear a **‘dog collar’** to experience this phenomenon. You’ve had experiences in which some tough difficult word spoken to you, that at the time you thought was a harsh judgment, turned out to be the most loving thing anyone ever said to you.

A student was describing a course he was taking. **“It is taught by the most insensitive, arrogant lecturer I’ve ever had. He’s sarcastic, always on the attack, always trying to make us look dumb.”** Then he added. **“I’ve never worked so hard in all my life. In fact, this may be the best course I’ve ever taken. He’s a wonderful teacher!”**

Perhaps that’s why Aristotle, in some of his thoughts on education, said that only a friend can teach you really important things in life. Why? Because, said Aristotle, only a friend knows how to hurt you in the right way! Sometimes it’s hard to tell the good news from the bad.

Take this morning’s scripture from Mark. Now right off I note that one of the troubling things about this story is that Mark does not tell it exactly the same way that it’s told in the other gospels. One gospel calls this man **“young,”** another gospel calls him **“rich.”** Mark just calls him **“a man.”** Now I’d rather him be a **“young”** man or a **“rich”** man, since I’m neither of those. That way I can reassure myself with, **“This is not my story. It’s more likely to be a story about some of you!”**

I’m always grateful when I can get a story that’s about you and not about me. Mark says simply that he was a **“man,”** that is, an ordinary person with no particular pedigree, one of us. Later in the story, we’re told that he **“had many possessions,”** but who among us doesn’t fit that description?

We may not be rich, or young, but we all have lots of stuff, a great many things. So right now we’ve a sneaking suspicion that we may not be able to keep this story away from us. It may be a story about us after all.

The story does not end in depression, grieving, and rejection, but in Jesus’ glad promise and in rejoicing. That’s how this story ends, with rejoicing! Jesus tells them, **“I promise you, for everything you have given up, I will give you much more. For everything you’ve turned your back on, I’ll give you ten times more. Rejoice!”**

Sometimes, on Sundays, I look out among you and I see you as you are – contemporary Aussie disciples who are trying to follow Jesus.

Jesus has set out on a journey, and even though you know full well where the journey ends, you’re walking with him. Even though you know that his teaching sometimes elicits shock and even grief, you still listen. You still follow. And for that, Jesus says, **“Rejoice!”**

I see you, who have forgone promotions in your job and upward mobility because you wanted to be a good parent more than you wanted better money. I see someone who’s turned her back on a great opportunity at work because she wanted to stay home and look after her mother after a stroke. I see young people who may not be voted **“Most Popular”** in the crowd because of values and commitments that are more determined by Jesus than by popular culture.

In the ending of this story, Jesus doesn’t say to you, **“It’s impossible to save any early 21st century Aussie types.”** Rather he says, **“Rejoice!”** There are many odds set against following me but, rejoice. With God all things are possible, even the fidelity of ordinary people like us.

The story seems to imply, if you want to feel bad or be grieved, then grieve for those poor souls who have little more to live and die for than their stuff, their possessions, their own selfish selves. You get to give your lives for Jesus! You get to follow me where I’m going. You get to swim against the stream. You get to be part of the revolution! Rejoice!

“When Joe was born,” she said, **“we thought it was incredibly bad luck. It seemed so unfair. Our first child, with such a severe disability. Sad to say, Tom and I considered putting our baby up for adoption, or placing him in care. I asked my dear mother what she thought I ought to do.”**

What do we have here, good news or bad? Of course, what we have here is bad news. We are ordinary women and men, who have lots of stuff, who have come to Jesus to be taught. Each of us has gotten out of bed and come to church in order to be taught by Jesus. We come to Jesus asking, “*Good Teacher, what must we do to be faithful followers of your way?*” or, “*Good Teacher, how can I better understand the Bible?*”

Here, a sincere seeker comes to the feet of Jesus to be taught, and the lesson ends in failure. In fact, this is the only call story in all the gospels where someone rejects the call. Someone, a man, maybe young, maybe rich, maybe just a man, is being asked to come follow Jesus.

But he was shocked and grieved by what Jesus taught him. So he refuses, and the reason was money. This is bad news, discouraging teaching about how our material attachments, our false loves and idolatries, keep us from following Jesus. The story ends in depression, in rejection; it’s the bad news about that.

But the good thing is, though this may be bad news, it may not be your bad news. I’ll be the first to admit that people who have “*great possessions,*” lots of stuff, do not always come off that well in the gospels. Bad news. But wait, where does this story end? Does it end with the man’s rejection and exit? No, Peter the ‘king pin’ disciple blurts out, “*Lord, we’ve left everything, homes, family, friends; to follow you!*”

In other words, we’re not like the inquiring man who came up to you asking you idle theological questions, but was shocked and grieved by your confronting answers. Unlike him, when you called us, we didn’t slink away in the other direction. We fronted up! We let go of a lot in order to be embraced by you, in order to join your movement.

We stayed the course, kept attending classes, kept taking notes, even when we were shocked by what you taught us, even when we’re aggrieved or angered by some things the church does. Some Sundays we wanted to walk away, go in the other direction, sleep in late, because that way it would be easier than to be confronted by the sometimes shocking words of this “*Good Teacher.*” But we did not! We stayed the course. We kept at it. We’re still here. And then Jesus says, “*Rejoice!*”

(Read Mark 10:35-45.)

One day, on his way, Jesus meets a man. Mark casually mentions that Jesus was “*setting out on a journey.*” You know what that means. You know where this “*journey*” is going to end in just a few more chapters. The cross! And as he begins this fateful journey, he is encountered by a man who has “*great possessions,*” who addresses him as “*Good Teacher.*” Jesus is a teacher, a rabbi, who is called good.

The man is religiously inclined and attempts to get Jesus into a discussion about eternal life. But Jesus isn’t ‘going there’. So, in an attempt to give the man the flick (Jesus seems to have a short fuse for these well-fixed, inquisitive types), Jesus tells him to go and obey all of the commandments, and then come back and they can talk.

The man surprises Jesus by saying, “*Oh, I’ve obeyed all the commandments, since I was a kid in Sunday school. I’ve never broken one of them!*”

It turns out that this man is not only successful **materially** (he has lots of stuff) but he is also successful **spiritually**. Who among us would claim to have obeyed all of the commandments? Jesus has been confronted here with a man who is a high flyer, a great success.

So, maybe in one last attempt to really sock it to him, Jesus says to him, “*I love you, and because I love you so much, I’m going to give you something I don’t just give to anybody. I want you to go, sell everything you’ve got, give it to the poor, and then come follow me.*”

With that, the text says this man slumped down, got quite depressed, gets back into his Porsche, and leaves. He was shocked by what the good teacher told him. He went away “*grieved.*” He dropped out of the course, he quickly lost interest and went in a direction where the good teacher was not.

And with that Jesus says, “*Wow, it’s hard to save some people.*” “*How hard is it, Jesus?*” ask his disciples. Jesus responds, “*It is about as hard as getting a camel through the eye of a needle! Impossible! Of course, with God, I suppose anything is possible, even this.*”