

“All or Nothing”  
Mark 10:17-31

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Last week Melinda, our wonderful liturgist this morning, received a check in the mail for a bill she had overpaid. The check was for five cents. I joked that she should remember to tithe 10% back to the church, and last Sunday she arrived at worship and handed me a shiny nickel. Little did she know she was modeling today’s Gospel lesson when Jesus tells the man who wants to inherit eternal life that he must sell all he owns and give his money to the poor.

This lesson, along with its final words, “the first will be last and the last shall be first,” is one of Jesus’ most famous teachings. It is also the teaching that is one of the biggest struggles to interpret or know how to live into. Even though Jesus’s words are pretty direct, for me it is one that I am likely to add caveats to and put parameters around. Yes, sell all that I own, but surely only the things I don’t really need right? And I’m the only one who can judge what I really need? Or, yes, give my money to the poor, but mostly give away the money I’m not expecting or the gifts that don’t leave too much of a dent in my bank account, right? I’ll happily give away all the surprise nickels I come across!

Part of the struggle in embracing these instructions is that no matter the context, culturally we have a hard time talking about money. The number one fight that married couples have is about money. Political party lines are split across financial priorities and values. Even here at Edgewood, we have a heck of a time finding new members for our Finance Committee

because people either think they don't know enough about number crunching to serve on it or they are nervous about being the voice of the budget to the rest of the congregation.

Conversations about money do not tend to flow freely, which means very few of us have safe outlets or practice exploring together how finances impact our lives, what guides us in making financial decisions, or what our values teach us about how we understand wealth. Regardless of our individual incomes, living in one of the wealthiest countries in the world means that each of us has a responsibility to understand the impact wealth or the lack thereof has on lives and communities. How do we begin to have those conversations together when we are so out of practice? What might that even look like?

The way I am able to understand this part of Jesus' teachings is to remember that they are not separate from his other teachings. His instruction about what we should do with our possessions is an extension of his other instructions on how to live life in a way that fulfills God's greatest hopes for our humanity.

For example, when we think about what Jesus stood for or what the biggest takeaway from his ministry is, we most commonly point to love. We talk about how he showed his disciples how to love in a new way. We talk about his encounters with all kinds of strangers and the love he offered to them, sometimes through healing, sometimes through breaking down barriers, sometimes through telling a story. We have memorized the commandment to love our neighbors, love God, and love ourselves. Love is always the answer. I wonder if our understanding of how we are to spend our money or how we are to negotiate wealth and possessions changes if we look at it through the lens of love.

Edgewood, we are a church that understands love. We have long been a place of refuge for people who felt rejected - we come to this place and experience love in the midst of community. We are a church that is aware that our kind of Christianity, one that encourages questions and believes God is still speaking to us, is not always popular in other Christian spheres. We know that because we encounter those differences in our own families. So we wonder aloud and learn from each other what it means to love people with different beliefs than us. We have a nuanced understanding of the commandment to love that allows us to love all people while not enabling harmful behaviors or condoning hateful words. In everything we do, we try to do so in a way that points toward God's love, not just for us, but for our neighbors, for all of humanity, for all of creation. When it comes to love, we are all in. We are a people who understand love.

Our call to love is embedded in Jesus' teachings to give away possessions and reject wealth. Jesus is not asking his followers to burn their cash or put all their furniture out at the curb in the hope that someone takes it. Jesus is teaching us that if our wealth or our possessions, whatever they may be, start to get in the way of our ability to love, it's a problem that it going to make it harder for us to live as God calls us to live, to create God's kingdom here on earth, and to be the inheritor of an eternal life that is based on radical love.

Looking at it this way, I can see that if my wealth comes at the expense of my neighbor's inability to find affordable housing or live with food security, I am turning away from love. I can see that if I have everything and my neighbor has nothing, I am turning away from love. I can see that if I have access to resources or supplies and do not consider the needs of the community, I am turning away from love.

There are a few things we have learned from teachers other than Jesus that have become a barrier to allowing us to see money as something to hold lightly and give away freely. The teachers of capitalism, greed, and competition have taught us to take as much as we can for ourselves because there is only so much to go around. They have taught us that how much we have is a marker of success, and perhaps even of our goodness. To have more is to be good, to be better than, to be the best. They have taught us that we deserve what we have, or else we wouldn't have it.

Jesus offers a different way. A way where money or wealth of any kind is not a marker of value or success or achievement, only love is. A way where we are asked to think communally instead of individually, and where we are challenged to live generously, to give until we can feel what we have given, until we can feel the difference it has made to someone else.

As a church, we wrestle with what it means to be a congregation with a healthy budget and a generous endowment. We strive to use our annual budget in ways that help us love our community more deeply, whether it is by caring for our church community or supporting our neighbors, locally and globally. Our leaders make decisions that try to have the biggest impacts and create a community of faith that points toward generosity. We try to give until we can feel it - all those times when we're "not quite sure" if we're going to have enough at the end of the year are a sure sign of our faithfulness.

And we understand our endowment in a similar way, our endowment being like our "savings account" for the church where only a small percentage is spent each year. It's a way of honoring the connections between our generations, of caring for those to come instead of saying, "Let's have all the fun ourselves and the next group can raise their own money." Having an

endowment allows us to make long-term investments in the future of our church to ensure that we keep turning toward love and keep supporting the community around us. If it was a pot of money we were sitting on with no vision for the impact it can make or its purpose, I'd start to get worried. But when it is used to create an extended plan of generosity and communal love, it becomes its own ministry. We need that balance that cares for the future and cares for today - we need to use our annual budget for all its worth to spread a ministry of love and imagine how we might be called to love in the years to come.

Similarly, this is why we see our building as a communal space - not just for our members but for a wider ministry. It's why when we began to reopen the building, before we returned to worship, before any of our ministry teams met in person, we called our AA groups and said, "We're open for you." If our building only serves us, it keeps us walled off from loving our neighbors.

The first shall be last and the last shall be first. We are called to question, to wonder, to discern how we are living as individuals and as a community in a way that reorients us toward our deep connections with our neighbors and to the rest of the creation, reorienting away from being the best and toward being at one with. Away from competition and toward collaboration.

There is a story I once heard that really helped me understand this lesson. It is a story from Mark Bezos, who is not at all related to Jeff, and is a completely normal guy. Well, a completely normal guy with a TED Talk, but other than that, you would never know his name. Mark is a volunteer firefighter. In his town, volunteers supplement the paid firefighters, so volunteers have to respond to calls very quickly to get an assignment when there is an emergency.

The first time he ever responded to a fire, he happened to be the second volunteer to arrive. He was excited because he knew that meant he was likely to get a good job. He raced up to the captain in charge, and saw him talking to the woman whose house was on fire. He says that “she must have been having one of the worst days of her life because here it was the middle of the night, she was standing outside in the pouring rain, in her pajamas, barefoot, while her house was in flames.”

Mark rushes up to them, and the other volunteer who arrives before him receives his assignment. The captain tells this volunteer to go inside and save the woman's dog. Mark hears this, and he is stunned with jealousy. “THE DOG! OH! FOR THE REST OF HIS LIFE this other guy would get to tell people that he ran into a burning building and saved a living creature, just because he beat Mark by five seconds.” Mark was next, and he thought to himself, “Surely my assignment will also be great!”

The Captain waved him over and said, “Bezos! I need you to go into that house, I need you to go upstairs, past the fire, and I need you to get this woman...a pair of shoes.” He could barely hide his disappointment at being given such a small task. But on he went, inside the house, down the hall, past the “real” firefighters who had almost finished putting out the fire, into the bedroom, and he got a pair of shoes.

He came out carrying them, only to run into that lucky first volunteer holding the beloved dog, renewing his jealousy as he looked from the shoes to the dog and back again. He says they took their treasures outside to the homeowner where, “not surprisingly” the other volunteer and the dog received much more attention than his shoes did.

A few weeks later the fire department received a letter from the homeowner, thanking them for the heroic work they did to save her home. The act of kindness that she noted above all others? Someone had even gotten her a pair of shoes.

Mark Bezos has these powerful words of reflection that I'm going to leave you with today: "Don't wait. Don't wait until you make your first million to make a difference in someone's life. If you have something to give, give it now...Not every day is going to offer us the chance to save someone's life, but every day is going to offer us the chance to effect one. So get in the game; save someone's shoes." Amen.