

“Holy Tension”

Sermon from Matthew 19:16-26

Given Sunday, March 22, 2020

for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

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Someone came up to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus replied, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only One who is good. But if you wish to enter Life, keep the commandments.” “Which ones?” the youth asked. Jesus replied, “No killing. No committing adultery. No stealing. No bearing false witness. Honor your parents. Love your neighbor as yourself.” The youth said to Jesus, “I have kept all of these. What more do I need to do?” Jesus said, “If you want to be perfect, go and sell what you own and give the money to poor people, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me.” Upon hearing this the youth, whose possessions were many, went away sadly. Jesus said to the disciples, “The truth is, it is difficult for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. I’ll say it again – it is easier for a camel to pass through the Needle’s Eye gate than for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of heaven.” When the disciples heard this, they were astonished. “Then who can be saved?” they said. Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but for God everything is possible.”

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Last week I was running along Adams Street when a woman pulled up to park outside a shop and stepped out of her car a little ways ahead of me. And instead of going straight into the shop she was headed for, she paused there by the sidewalk and as I approached she started cheering. For me. As I was running.

By myself. It was like a race scene, except it wasn't a race, I was just out for a morning run, and she wasn't a part of a crowd, she was just clapping and cheering and encouraging me on. Truth be told, I was a little tired at that point, and seeing and hearing her gave me some new energy. So I said, "Thanks! That's just what I needed to keep going." And she said, "I always want to cheer for people running, whenever I see them. I never have before. I guess I was afraid it'd feel, or seem, silly." And I said, "For me, it feels great!" But I was still moving, and she was clearly headed somewhere, so we waved and laughed and kept going in our own directions.

And I've been thinking about that gesture since then – and about her confession, that she always wants to cheer people on, but is worried that it'll seem silly. And I've thought about how many things I don't say or do, how much I ignore my intuition, or the Spirit's prompting, because of this tension between what seems like a good idea and what seems like an acceptable mode of decorum. But these seem like days where we can maybe rethink some of that, where we can play with some of that tension.

Layton Williams points out in *Holy Disunity* that so much of the character of the God we proclaim is not certainty, not either-or, but tension. God wrestles with Jacob *and* embraces and blesses him. God speaks out of a whirlwind *and* in a gentle breeze after the storm. God is one, we say, *and* somehow also three. Human *and* divine. Williams writes, “Accepting these unsolvable tensions is a crucial cornerstone of our theology. When we run from tension, push it away, or rush to resolve it, when we settle for black-and-white easy answers, we also miss the chance to encounter the God-given complexity in ourselves, and in others, and in the world.”

One of the tensions in this time, for me, is thinking about who we are becoming in these days, and wondering how much of the good that’s being created right now is sustainable once this crisis has passed.

Like, I’ve always wanted to memorize poetry with my kids. This week I made them a book of great works, from diverse times and diverse poets – they’re thrilled, in case you were wondering – and we’ve started working on one called, “The Average Hippopotamus.” (And if you’re thinking there’s not a lot that rhymes with hippopotamus, you should look up this

poem.) I hope we'll keep reading poems even once they're back at school and have other assignments.

There's a neighborhood in Berkeley where residents are drawing rainbows and hanging them in their windows, so that little kids walking by have something to look for, and count. What a gift, right? Even people who don't like kids can do that. And that color, and that shape of promise, might also be nice for the person who creates us, and looks at it from the inside.

Mac Water & Light has announced that they will match every dollar, up to twenty thousand, contributed to their Customers Helping Customers program, so we can help keep electricity and water service from being interrupted for those in our community who fall on hard times. That's a program that was in existence before this, and will continue long after.

And there are bigger things, and farther away:

The federal government is waiving interest accrual on student loans for the duration of this crisis. Police in Miami, New Orleans, and New York have said they'll no longer aid in evicting people from their living spaces while this stress is

bearing down on us. San Antonio, to keep its jails from overcrowding, will stop locking people up for minor offenses. These aren't just random acts of kindness, they are calculated and sensible moves social protection. And they are potentially life-altering moves of generosity and justice.

But as Dan Kois, whose article for Slate last week lists these moves and even more, as he asks: Why were jails overfilled with people whose offenses were minor in the first place? And why is our government charging its own citizens interest to go to school anyway? And why do the police aid evictions when tenants are stricken with other, non-coronavirus illnesses?

There is beauty born of these hard days. And there is tension born of that beauty, that calls us to ask: who are we? Who are we at our best, and who are we at our worst? And *who are we becoming, for each other, in these days that keep us away from each other?* How might the generosity we practice so easily now become part of not just what we do, but who we are?

The person in our scripture today is looking for something more to do. He says, "Ok, Jesus, here's what I've done. What else is there to do?" He knows the rules, he's followed them,

but he's got this hunch, he's got this intuition telling him there's something more. And of course there is.

But it might not be something more to *do*.

There is a whole host of tensions in this story: we see difference between written and unwritten rules; between what's possible for us and what's possible for God; between the young man's sense of lack, and his yearning for fulfillment, between *doing* and *being*. And our main character here has been really good at doing; he's been really dedicated to following the rules. But he comes to Jesus now because of some question in his belly, some hunch that there's something more.

And Jesus says, "Ok, since you asked... what's most important is a rule that's not actually written down anywhere. And it's not so much a new rule as it is a new way. It's just this: All that you've been working for, all that you've accumulated, all that you've devoted your life to achieving – give it away. Unclench your fist and release it. Find a way for all of that to now become gift for your neighbor."

The young man is sad, the story tells us, because of how impossible this request feels. But we're not told he doesn't do it. We can be sad and still do hard things.

At our Bible Study Friday someone said, "Jesus knows how to poke this guy where it hurts." And someone asked her in response, "Where would that be, do you think, for you?"

Where would that be for you, do you think?

Jesus isn't asking the young man to upend his life so that the guy has something more to do. Jesus is asking him to upend his life because he's looking for a new way to be.

In these days, where so many of the rules are unwritten, where so much of life feels upended for so many, the invitation of Jesus still stands: come, and find your place in this community. Come and be part of these people whose lives are with and for each other. Come and shed what doesn't serve you, and let your gifts serve others. Come and know that with God, all things – even abundant life in the midst of all this tension – with God, all things are possible.