

Session 7—Risk

Following Christ by accepting the cost and the gift.

Principal Text: Luke 18: 18-29

Supportive Texts: Mark 10:17-31; Matthew: 19:16-30; Romans 8

We will consider:

- Does God expect us to leave everything behind to follow Christ?
- The blessings of belonging to Christ.
- The privilege of becoming part of the kingdom of God.

Hymn: (*Found in Evangelical Lutheran Worship*) “Jesus Calls us; o’er the Tumult”, #696.

Prayer (*Spoken by the leader*)

O God, the Great ‘I Am’, you nourish us with your word each day. You reveal yourself to us in Jesus Christ, the living water and the living bread. We proclaim that Jesus is our master and our friend. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life! He is our power and the hope for eternal life. He is our wisdom and the source of our being. We thank you because Jesus is all sufficient for us, offering us peace beyond our understanding. Restore to us the joy of your salvation, so that our hearts may sing your praises, and our minds may be filled with the knowledge and love of you. Inspire us to follow you faithfully, knowing and trusting that you provide us with a richness that is immeasurable and a life that is eternal. Help us to accept all that you offer to us graciously and to trust you without fear and doubt. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Introduction

From our reflections on women who played pivotal roles in the history of God’s salvific plan, we now move on to draw inspiration from Christ’s teaching on discipleship and God’s kingdom.

Jesus began his ministry teaching about the social and personal relevance of the kingdom of God in our lives as being that which provides the framework to believe, to belong and to behave. Throughout history however, the concept of the kingdom of God has been misunderstood by some to be hierarchical and imperialistic. Because of this, a few theologians have tried to coin alternative terms such as “the in-breaking reign of God,” “the commonwealth of God,” and “the kin-dom of God.”

While we follow Christ, questions arise within us every now and then; ‘What should I do,’ ‘Have I done enough,’ or ‘Should I do more’ to merit eternal life? We wonder whether we have to renounce everything and live a sacrificial life to earn it. These were the very questions that the rich man came to ask of Jesus. The struggle of internalizing the understanding that we are saved by grace through faith and not through our good works is deep in every human thought. Martin Luther, in his time, wrestled with similar questions until he found the preaching of grace in the book of Romans paved the way for the Reformation. Belonging to this transforming fellowship requires only an acknowledgement that we are unable to work our way towards salvation and eternal life, but can gladly embrace them by receiving the unmerited grace freely offered to us by Christ Jesus.

How Then Shall We Live? Following Christ in a Broken World

Read Luke 18: 18 -29

It is very difficult to be hard on a young man who is very rich and yet has a deep desire to find the right path to salvation. As an observant Jew, and in his own confession, he had tried his best to follow the commandments. Why then did he feel that the way in which he had tried to follow was not enough to merit salvation and eternal life?

Such a question was common in Jesus' time, usually referencing the text in Micah 6:8, "What does the Lord require of you." It was then turned into an introspective question for their times, "What good deed (literally commandment) can I do to gain eternal life?"

The rich man believed that he must do something extraordinary to merit eternal life because his strict life-long observance of the law had not provided that assurance.

Three important aspects of following Christ can be inferred from this text: First, we must consider how we view Jesus. The rich ruler addresses Jesus as 'good teacher.' Many major religions of the world acknowledge that Jesus was an excellent teacher, a prophet and even one of the avatars, but would not recognize him as God. Even some Christians, believing him to be a good teacher, wholly reject his crucifixion. They dismiss that a loving God would punish a child in such a brutal way and reject the theology of the cross and the concept of atonement.

If Jesus was only a good teacher he could not save anybody. Jesus did not just come to show us the way to God. He showed himself as The Way to eternal life. He was the Pascal lamb slaughtered to remove the bondage of sin and justified us from all unrighteousness. Through his finished work on the cross, we have life in all abundance here on earth as well the assurance of eternal life in the hereafter. This is the pivotal point of our faith.

In Jewish tradition, the title 'good' belongs to God alone. In calling Jesus "Good teacher" therefore, the rich man uses the title irreverently or loosely. Jesus calls him out on this suggesting that, if God alone is good, the rich man must, by his own acknowledgement, accept Jesus as God or not at all.

The second important learning we derive from Jesus' teaching is that our work does not save us however much we try to make it so. The rich man was taught by his Jewish teachers that people were saved by their works. If such a belief holds water, the rich man should have been at peace and sure of inheriting eternal life, and not have been anxious to ascertain from Jesus what he must do in addition to following the commandments (which are, incidentally, but a mirror reflecting us as we are; sinful and unjust people unable to rise to the standard of holiness called for by the commandments.) "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." (Romans 3: 20-24).

How Then Shall We Live? Following Christ in a Broken World

The third part of the lesson from this text is the answer to the question about whether we have to leave everything in order to follow Christ—something the rich man wasn't prepared to do. The common convention is to portray the rich man as one who loves his riches more than Christ. But to be fair to him, he does not know Christ as the Messiah. The rich man is banking on two things: his ability to earn his eternal salvation, and that which will ensure his quality of life here on earth; his riches. He cannot see the Lord of all his wealth; the one who would give him more than he could ask or imagine. Ironically, after his encounter with the Christ and the choice that he makes, the rich man returns home a poor man.

Are we then to renounce wealth? The ensuing conversation with the disciples provides the answer to this question. The disciples are troubled by the event and the impetuous Peter speaks up to say that, unlike the rich man, they had left everything to follow Jesus. Peter, Andrew, James, and John gave up a prosperous fishing business. Matthew had given up a lucrative career and all of the ill-gotten gains that he had amassed. They all had given up the stability and comfort of homes and families, and Peter wanted to know what their reward would be.

The Lord answered their unspoken question, “‘I tell you the truth,’ Jesus said to them, ‘no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God 30 will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life.’” (Luke 18:29-30). In other words, there is nothing that we give up to follow Christ that can compare to all that we will get in return.

This story contains the essence of the doctrine of justification. It illuminates the difference between belief and faith and the struggle between assent and faith, the latter of which yields to God's gracious invitation to trust and to follow.

Discussion

1. What is your understanding of Luther's doctrine of justification? How is it expressed in your life?
2. Knowing that we are, by grace through faith, made free to follow Christ Jesus, what are the encumbrances that prevent us from fully living into this invitation? What are we unable or unwilling to let go of in order to follow?
3. How do Jesus' words to the disciples speak to you today, in your context? What might they mean for the Church?

Closing Activity

Form a circle and let each one in the group read aloud, in rotation, one verse from the letter to the Romans, Chapter 8. When you have completed the reading, let each person offer one reflection about how it compares with the conversation Jesus has with the rich man and his disciples about law, discipleship, riches and eternal life.

Closing Prayer (*An extemporary prayer may be offered by any member of the group.*)

Memory verse: Philippians 4:19

“And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”