

Selling Hope Short

Hebrews 4:12-16, Mark 10:17-22

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Imagine for a moment that you were sitting in the crowd that day. Maybe you were out to hear the new teacher in town or to see what all the commotion was about. Maybe you were there hoping to hear a word of good news, or you came out that day because you heard about the man who heals, and you were hoping he could do something for your pain. Maybe you were one of Jesus' closest disciples, ready to travel with him as he makes his way to Jerusalem, which is where our text starts off. Jesus, packed up, walking out of town, and as he starts walking away from the people still crowded around, a man runs up to him, out of breath, hoping to catch him in time.

There is a sense of desperation in his voice and in his demeanor. And when he finally catches up with Jesus, he kneels. "Good teacher," he says, with great respect and a sense of hope, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" This is not someone asking a philosophical question. And he isn't like one of the Pharisees trying to catch Jesus in a trap. Something is happening in this man that is deep and eager and anxious.

Everywhere else in Mark, when someone kneels before Jesus, they do so because they are requesting some sort of physical healing. Except for this man. "You know the commandments – do not murder, steal, commit adultery, bear false witness...." "Yes, yes, all of this I do...." Not an arrogant statement, but the humble response of a man who, very faithfully, lives his life by God's law. But then Jesus tells him that the only other thing he can do is give away his money and follow. And with that, the man went away.

Imagine what it would have been like to watch him walk away. Imagine what it would have been like if you had been in the crowd watching the man, who almost knocked you over trying to get to Jesus, just... walk away. This man is the only person in all of the gospels who had a personal encounter with Jesus and turned away, and he turned away full of sorrow. We are people who want happy endings; more than that we want clear, neat endings. And we often, mistakenly, try to resolve our endings by asking the same question as this wealthy man, "What must I do?"

Tony, a young man in Durham, North Carolina, was released from prison just a few days before his twenty-first birthday after serving five years.¹ Before being released, Tony enrolled in a faith based re-entry program. The day he was released, Tony met his team, a group from a local Baptist church who were committed to being a support system for him. The group ate together and spent time together. The team encouraged Tony as he applied for jobs. They helped him navigate his healthcare and finances. The violent crime rate in Durham was high, and Tony knew he needed support to make a change in his life. He had friends still in prison, and friends who had been buried way too young. Tony wanted a different ending. His team was incredible. Over time they grew very close. The members of the Watts Street Baptist Church Reconciliation and Re-entry Faith Team began to know Tony as a friend while seeing

more clearly the racial injustice in their city. And Tony found a group of church folks who loved him and supported him just as he was.

The team remained in a deep relationship with Tony for nine years, until the day he was killed, a victim of gun violence. Five hundred people attended his funeral, across race and class, across affiliation and prison time, across religious tradition and academic recognition.

And the funeral turned into a three-hour vigil. One of the many people who came up to the microphone to talk about Tony's life and legacy was a man well known in Durham's culture of violence. Before opening his mouth, he scanned the crowd, looking for faces that he knew, and said, "No retribution. If we're going to honor Tony, we will not shoot each other. We're not going to do violence in his name."² This comment was highlighted after the fact, a sign of a violent death finding meaning. And, of course, it was great that many resolved not to respond to Tony's death with violence, but even if guns didn't go off that night, or even that week, this nod to peace was purchased at an unspeakable, horrific price. For those of us always asking, "What more can I do," we have to wonder, "Was there any more that Tony could have done?"

Our stories, our lives, are not plotted out in advance. They are not neat, and they are not simple. Every local on the Pacific Beach Boardwalk in San Diego recognizes the 70-year-old man who spends his days rollerblading up and down the boardwalk.³ Always alone, this man skates listening to his music, sometimes laughing, sometimes closing his eyes while taking in the air. At times he waves to the people going by, and other times he slows his skating down to a stroll and appears lost in thought. Every day his face radiates joy. He skates all day, and sometimes he skates into the night. And then he repeats.

If you ask the locals about Slomo, as they call him, some may guess that he was a musician or an actor or maybe a veteran. Some believe he's homeless. Others wonder if he has some type of mental illness. Nobody knows his story, but everyone is willing to give him a high five as he skates by in slow motion. Nobody would guess that twenty years earlier, this man was a ladder climbing, self-involved, cynical, arrogant wealthy neurologist who suddenly realized that he didn't like his life.

In his early 50's, Dr. John Kitchin decided to reinvent himself, to experience life rather than work himself into oblivion. And he realized he had no desire for anything more than his basic needs and the chance to skate, which had been the only spiritual part of his life. So Dr. John Kitchin quit his job and traded in all of his possessions for a studio apartment and a really nice pair of roller blades. For 15 years he has lived his new life, skating on the boardwalk all day, religiously. It leaves one to wonder, is this all such a gifted man has left to do?

Our stories, our lives, are not plotted out in advance. Rarely logical, they can take us by surprise. When Sam Wells was working as a priest for the Church of England, he went to see a woman in her 90's who had not set foot in a church in more than seventy years, and she wanted to ask some questions as she considered returning to the church.⁴ Heading out to meet with her, Wells thought to himself, "Ah, this familiar story. A young person grows up in the church, but when she becomes a young adult, she decides to get outside and smell a different air. It took this woman longer than most, but she figured it was time to give church a second chance and, how happy will she be to learn that the church has been waiting patiently for her all this time."

Once they got through with the pleasantries conversation, Wells got to the point and asked, “What was it that led you away from the church for seventy-five years?” She answered, “It was when my husband, and I wanted to get married. We were in love, and the rector wouldn’t marry us.”

Wells was intrigued. (It sounded like a romance story with a twist.) “Was there something wrong? Had your husband been married before, or were you too young to be married?” “No,” she said calmly, and Wells recognized for the first time that she seemed to be holding back anger. “The rector looked at my hand. As a young girl, I worked in the mill, and I was in an accident when I was sixteen.” She held up her left hand. “The rector said that since I didn’t have a finger to put the wedding ring on, he couldn’t marry us.”

Wells was horrified. The color drained from his face. Suddenly her 75 years away from church seemed as if it might not have been long enough. This kind of stuff happens. And it forces us to ask what more we could have done.

Our stories, our lives, are not plotted out in advance. They are rarely easy and they can take us by surprise. What happened to the wealthy man who walked away from Jesus? He left in sorrow. He departed, sending himself into exile. What was his ending? Did he eventually return? Or spend the rest of his life in grief? Did he try to earn his way back in God’s grace?

The interesting thing about preaching this text to you all is that you are here, at least for today. You are in the crowd right now, still listening for Jesus. At the same time, I know that there are those of us each Sunday, laying low, wondering if Jesus would ever receive us back if we walked away.

We cannot be sure of the motivations of this man in this story. We’ll never know the depth of his needs, which we can only assume by his urgency as he ran toward Jesus. And we’ll never know the thoughts in his mind as he walked away, grieving. But we do know the character of God. And God doesn’t let people sit in sorrow indefinitely. God does not leave people exiled forever.

In this series on exile, as we have looked at stories throughout scripture, we have seen that God never leaves people abandoned. From Adam and Eve in their shame to Hosea and Gomer in their painful love, from the woman at the well, isolated by her own life, to Leah and Rachel, exiled within their own family system, God never gives up on people indefinitely. And you cannot tell me that this wealthy man has put himself further than the reach of God.

This man’s story, like so many others, leaves the conclusion up in the air. We don’t know what happens tomorrow. Each of the stories I just shared with you has a different kind of ending. A young man, leaving behind a life of violence, dies tragically from a gunshot wound. A middle-aged doctor reinvents himself, leaving behind one life for a drastically different one. And a woman in her last years of life decides whether to give the church another chance against all odds. All of our stories have turns. All of our stories, on some days, have no good conclusion. And in all of our stories, we face the daunting call to follow Jesus. Some days we choose to follow. And some days we walk away sorrowful.

“What must I do?” The man in our story asked the wrong question, just like we often ask, “What should I do?” or “What could we have done?” He did not trust that Jesus was the hope he was desperate for. He longed for something that Jesus had, but he couldn’t give up the notion that it was all in his control. That was his sin, trying

to make it on his own. That was his sin, believing his fundamental ending was in his own hands.

Our endings are not in our hands; they are in God's hands. That is what Adam and Eve, Leah and Rachel, Peter, Mary, Martha, Paul, Hosea and Gomer, Jonah, the woman at the well, the rich young ruler, you, and I come to know. Our endings are not in our hands; they are in God's hand.

What if you had been in that crowd that day, watching the person who came to Jesus with such urgency walk away full of sorrow? Our world is filled with...us...trying to write our own endings and failing. We are a people who need strength and power that is not our own. Our "doing it" is not going to cut it. And the only place we can go is to God, who can give us what we can never do for ourselves. Trusting that this is true, the only response I can think of is for us to pray. So let us pray. (The prayer is led by three people, interspersed with the hymn "I Want Jesus to Walk with Me.")

God of love, you created time and space and eternity, and your knowledge and wisdom exceed anything we can imagine. And, to be honest, God, we are often a bit jealous of your knowledge. We are prone to the vain venture of trying to be you, and sometimes we wish we knew everything. Still and yet, in this moment of worship, in this moment of reverence of a particular sort, in this moment when we are together before you singing hymns and anthems old and new, hearing ancient texts and fresh truth, and praying honest and hopeful prayers, in this moment of worship, we are glad you are who you are and that we are your children.⁵

(Sing verse one of "I Want Jesus to Walk with Me.")

God of all broken places, in the vast wonder of your creation, we know—you know—how scarred and broken it is here and there. You know the heart of each individual, scarred and broken here and there. You know the good that we have done and shall yet do and the passions within many for just and right causes, scarred and broken here and there. God, we forever try to cast our own endings to our stories, scarred and broken, here and there. Lead us, O God, to gratefully receive your story of life and hope for our lives and for the life of the world, scarred and broken as it is, here and there.

(Sing verse two of "I Want Jesus to Walk with Me")

God of promise, you know the memory of hope and the hope of memory, the faith of the ages in things not seen, and the loves we have each known, scarred and broken here and there. Help all of us—in spite of or because of the questions we ask, to experience the love of Christ Jesus, scarred and broken and redeemed giving meaning and hope to us again and again and again here and there in our beginnings and in our endings. We give you thanks.

(Sing verse three of "I Want Jesus to Walk with Me")

Amen.

Notes

- 1 Samuel Wells and Marcia A. Owen, *Living Without Enemies: Being Present in the Midst of Violence* (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 2011).
- 2 Gretchen E Ziegenhals, *The Christian Century*, Commentary on 1 Corinthians 9:16-23.
- 3 Josh Izenberg, "Slomo," Short documentary from *New York Times* on April 1, 2014.
- 4 Sam Wells, "What's Really Killing the Church," *The Christian Century*, July 11, 2013.
- 5 Prayer based on "A Pastoral Prayer for Easter" from James S. Lowry, *Prayers for the Lord's Day: Hope for the Exiles* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2002), 37-39.