

## **Put Down, Then Pick Up**

Luke 16: 1-13

Mark 8: 31-38

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### *Luke 16: 1-13*

Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’

And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

### *Mark 8: 31-38*

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.’

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On the Lenten journey with Jesus to Jerusalem, to Golgotha, we walk this road acknowledging our own mortality, our own finitude, our own fallibility, our own finiteness in this season of self-examination and reflection. We do not just hear the stories of the disciples, or of our faith ancestors, as we are called to find ourselves, our place, in the stories. It is as the poet

Ann Weems wrote, "...a time to take time to let the power of our faith story take hold of us, a time to let the events get up and walk around in us, a time to intensify our living unto Christ."

Let the power of our faith story take hold of us. This is a powerful opportunity, a bold and humbling opportunity that encourages us to embrace—and be embraced by—the stories, the Gospel, of our faith. When we hear the Scripture stories and sing the hymns that celebrate the glorified Jesus, the loving, compassionate miracle-working Jesus, the teaching and healing Jesus, we can imagine ourselves witnessing to such great love, care and wisdom as those stories so quickly, easily, tenderly, take hold of us.

Yet as wonderful as that part of Jesus' life and ministry is, alone it is narrow, limited and myopic. It would be as if we were standing behind a closed door and only allowing ourselves to see through the keyhole. Letting the faith story take hold of us and embrace us means we fully open the door and step over the threshold to fully be present so that the events get up and walk around in us.

With this mindset we use our imaginations and our senses to be immersed, to be held, in the stories, in our shared stories. We can follow one of the hallmark learning objectives that Jerome Berryman pioneered in his Godly Play religious education approach...." I wonder...."

'I wonder what it was like when that happened?' I wonder what it would be like to hear those words spoken to me?' 'I wonder how they felt when it was all over?' 'I wonder.'

Wondering is a way of reflecting on the story, a way of engaging with curiosity, a way of touching the objects in the story and being touched by them, a way of hearing the words spoken directly to you in this very moment.

And so I wonder today as Jesus quite openly tells the crowd, the disciples, tells you and me, that he must endure great suffering, be rejected by all the religious leaders, be killed, and after three days rise again, what did the disciples think and feel as they heard those words? Peter, always the first to speak and react, rebuked Jesus, and in turn was quickly rebuked himself. But I wonder about the other disciples and the crowds who were there. They have been watching Jesus do tremendous, incredible, miraculous healings, hearing him teach of God's coming kingdom with joy and justice for all, and now they hear the stunning chaos and graphic painful future just ahead as Jesus spoke so resolutely about his torture and his tomb. What did they think, how did they feel, knowing his glory would soon become agony?

And I wonder how startled and shocked they were to hear themselves personally invited into this deadly ordeal? "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." If any want to follow Jesus, it is not just in the compassionate feeding of thousands, or the joyful healing of life limiting, painful conditions, or in the miracle of walking on water, or in the loving welcome of all, but with a humiliating, brutal, bloody, instrument of torture and death. In time Dietrich Bonhoeffer will say, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

I wonder if you, if I, can ever fully grasp, understand and appreciate Jesus' invitation to deny ourselves, to pick up our cross and follow him, as those with him that day, and in the early centuries of the Church, would have faced great risks, costs and consequences beyond any we could ever know.

I wonder if you, if I, can ever fully grasp, understand and appreciate Jesus' invitation to deny ourselves, to pick up our cross and follow him, to die to ourselves, our desires, our pursuits, our plans, and to wholly count the cost? We, who in great acts of self-care and self-preservation, do all we can to avoid pain and suffering, faithfully follow the One who driven by love endured, embraced and accepted the cross, and asks us to deny ourselves and take up our cross to follow

him, to risk being in solidarity with those in need when it is uncomfortable or unsafe for us to do so, to advocate for the needs of another in spite of our wishes or personal interests, to work hard and long at a seemingly thankless and endless task because someone else will greatly benefit.

We are asked to deny ourselves, to put down all that we clench tightly, so that our hands are open to reach for and hold onto the weight of our cross. Jesus asks us to put down so that we can pick up. Put down our distractions, our jealousy, our anger, our fears, our doubts, our misguided ambitions, our resentments, our self-centeredness so that we can pick up our cross. Put down our multitasking for two masters, our striving for wealth and possessions, our self-interests, our false ego, our shrewdly dishonest and calculating abilities so that we can pick up our cross and be committed to Christ.

Before we take up our cross, we must deny ourselves, because we can't bend down and take up our cross until we first put down all that stops us from doing so with humble hearts, willing spirits and open hands.

I wonder about the times when I, when we, like the disciples and the crowds, have followed in the ways Jesus is leading in my life, in our lives, and we have expected a glorious result, but found that he was leading me, leading us, to the cross instead.

I wonder how each of you calculated the costs, put down your own interests and ambitions, to pick up your cross as you live out your faith walk with Jesus from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, from a manger to a cross, from the waters of baptism to the bread and cup poured out for us.

I wonder. Amen.