



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Looking at you, Jesus loves you.

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 11, 2015
The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Mark 10:17-31 and Hebrews 4:12-16*

Earlier this year an article appeared in *The Washington Post* by Rachel Held Evans, a self-described American Christian, a *New York Times* best-selling author and blogger who writes about faith, doubt and life—and church. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/jesus-doesnt-tweet/2015/04/30/fb07ef1a-ed01-11e4-8666-a1d756d0218e_story.html

Ms. Evans, herself a millennial, says churches that desperately try to lure young adults to church by making worship hipper or edgier or cooler—like serving freshly brewed coffee and macchiatos in the lobby, like giving away an iPad at the end of the service (or even giving away a car at Easter!)—may be missing the point.

Evans notes: “You’re just as likely to hear the words ‘market share’ and ‘branding’ in church staff meetings these days as you are in any corporate office ... Church rebranding efforts can actually backfire, especially when young people sense that there is more emphasis on marketing Jesus than actually following Him.”

Evans quotes one young adult: “At church, I do not want to be entertained. I do not want to be the target of anyone’s marketing. I want to be asked to participate in the life of an ancient-future community.”

I think that may be true for other age groups as well. I’m not a millennial, but these comments resonated with me. “To participate in the life of an ancient-future community.” I think that’s what we’re all doing here. Some of us have been here at St. Bart’s for many years. Some of us may have just walked in these doors. All of us are seeking what only each of us can name.

The scriptures we hear this morning, both from the Gospel of Mark and from the Letter to the Hebrews, feel like a splash of cold water in our faces. They are difficult. They challenge us! Part of participating in the life of this ancient-future community is hearing scriptures like this and engaging with them, rather than trying to soften them up or running away from them.

In today’s passage from the Gospel of Mark, a man runs up to Jesus and asks him respectfully, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Ironic that the man is asking Jesus about eternal life as Jesus is on his way—not just on a journey, but on his way—to Jerusalem where he will give up his very life.

When the man tells Jesus, “Teacher, I have kept all these commandments from my youth,” Jesus looks at the man, and loves him. Then Jesus tells the man the thing hardest for him to hear: “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

The man is shocked, shaken to his core. He goes away grieving, because he has many possessions. Jesus looks around and declares to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”

The disciples don't get it. (This comforts me.) Jesus repeats himself—and adds, humorously, to make his point, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

I think these statements about how easily wealth can come between God and us are some of the hardest for us to hear and engage with. That has always been the case. It's astonishing to find how many exegetical contortions there have been over 2,000 years to try to make these statements mean something else. But there is no getting around them. Leading scholars believe these statements, difficult as they are, to be authentic sayings of Jesus.

Most of us living in this country, and particularly in this city, are wealthy by the world's standards. I don't usually think of myself as wealthy, but this week, as I've wrestled with these readings, I've been squirming. Because I've felt Jesus is looking directly at me—looking directly at each of us, loving each of us, asking each of us questions hardest for us to hear: What is your relationship with your wealth? What is your relationship with what you own? With what you wish you owned? How much time and energy are you spending acquiring, taking care of what you already own, trying to pay for what you own, worrying about debt?

How much time and energy are you spending caring for those who don't have food or shelter or schooling or medical care? How much time and energy are you spending with God? What Jesus is asking is this: “How should we live faithfully in this material world? How shall we live with what we have?” [*Generous Saints: Congregations Rethinking Ethics and Money* by James Hudnut-Beumler, p. ix]

With Jesus looking me—and us—in the eye and asking these direct questions, that sheds light on those verses from Hebrews: “The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joint from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden. But all is naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.”

This is not a warm, fuzzy image. It is incredibly clear, uncomfortably clear. This is a surgeon skillfully using a scalpel. Jesus, the ultimate heart surgeon. Jesus who sees us and knows us. Jesus, Son of the living God, who has created us, “who created our inmost parts; who knit each of us together in our mother's womb,” as Psalm 139 reminds us. This is the God from whom we cannot hide, try as we might.

Remember the other verses of Psalm 139: [v. 1-3, 6-8, *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 794]

LORD, you have searched me out and known me;
you know my sitting down and my rising up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.
You trace my journeys and my resting places
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Indeed, there is not a word on my lips,
but you, O LORD, know it altogether.
Where can I go then from your Spirit?
where can I flee from your presence?
If I climb up to heaven, you are there;
if I make the grave my bed, you are there also.
If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
Even there your hand will lead me
and your right hand hold me fast.

This is our God, who came to us in flesh, in Jesus. Our God who sees every part of us, who knows our every thought, who looks at us directly—and **loves** us. Loves us enough to challenge us.

Again from Hebrews: “Let us approach the throne of grace with boldness [with boldness, not fear], so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

Mercy and grace. Love, deeper than we can imagine.

Back to *The Washington Post* article. Evans found her way back into the church—the Episcopal Church, as it happens. She says,

“What finally brought me back, after years of running away, wasn’t lattes or skinny jeans; it was the sacraments. Baptism, confession, Communion, preaching the Word, anointing the sick—you know, those strange rituals and traditions Christians have been practicing for the past 2,000 years. The sacraments are what make the church relevant, no matter the culture or era. They don’t need to be repackaged or rebranded; they just need to be practiced, offered and explained in the context of a loving, authentic and inclusive community ... A church can have a sleek logo and Web site, but if it’s judgmental and exclusive, if it fails to show the love of Jesus to all, [people] will sniff it out ... reasons for leaving [and staying] have less to do with style and image and more to do with substantive questions about life, faith and community.

“If [people] are looking for congregations that authentically practice the teachings of Jesus in an open and inclusive way, then the good news is the church already knows how to do that ... You can get a cup of coffee with your friends anywhere, but church is the only place you can get ashes smudged on your forehead as a reminder of your mortality. You can be dazzled by a light show at a concert on any given weekend, but church is the only place that fills a sanctuary with candlelight and hymns on Christmas Eve. You can snag all sorts of free swag for brand loyalty online, but church is the only place where you are named a beloved child of God with a cold plunge into the water. You can share food with the hungry at any homeless shelter, but only the church teaches that a shared meal brings us into the very presence of God.”

It is impossible for us earn eternal life. It is impossible for us to earn our way into the kingdom of God. These are ours only by God’s grace.

Trusting in God’s grace and mercy and love, we can hear these tough, clear, direct questions that shake us to our core. We can have courage to wrestle with them. We can have courage to be honest with ourselves—and with God. We can risk doing the hard things needed to live in right and loving relationship with God and with each other.

That’s one of the reasons we’re here together in this ancient-future community.

That’s why we’re on this Way, on Jesus’ Way of living, together.

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