

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
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Sermon for October 11, 2009
Lessons: Jeremiah 9:23-26 and Mark 10:17-22

SECURITY PATCH

“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” The man has a good life already. He is well-spoken, religious, moral, and wealthy by the standards of his time and place. Yes, there seems to be some initial rub the wrong way. Jesus does not like being called “Good Teacher.” He objects to the word “good” because he lives by the grace of God and not by any concern with his own goodness, besides which there can be something annoying about being praised by a stranger who wants something, and Jesus likes direct, honest speech. Jesus quickly insists that God alone is good and moves on to the question, but even so he and the man seem to be talking on two different levels.

Jesus has come announcing change, drastic change in the conditions of life in this world. He calls the new set of conditions “the kingdom of God” or “reign of God,” and in the reign of God, those who have fared poorly under the conditions of life in this world will be blessed: the poor, the humble, and those in unanswered need of healing, justice, or hope. The old order is passing away and even now stands condemned for its inhumanity. Like a parent, God is displeased when a few of the children take everyone’s share, leaving their sisters and brothers without enough. Under the old order, the victor is the one honored, the winner in battle or competition. The Romans amused themselves with deadly contests and seem to have liked them unequal, so the outcome was seldom in doubt: slaves against lions, prisoners against trained gladiators. I suppose these “sporting” events supported the public self-image expressed in the saying, “Romans always win.” Jesus came blessing, not the victors, but the peacemakers, which did not make him popular with the successful.

This man who has approached Jesus with a felt need wants heaven, not the kingdom of God. He is not seeking any drastic change in the conditions of life here and now, but he has found a security flaw – a vulnerability in his good life. Well, it isn’t fair to say he found that flaw, as though he just recently discovered it. We all know it’s there, but most days we ignore it because thinking about it would only drag us down and spoil whatever goodness we enjoy in our lives. The flaw, of course, is our mortality which decrees we all must die. The man is not asking how to live fully and rightly under the conditions of God’s redemptive love; he is asking how to fix the flaw, his vulnerability to death. How do I get *eternal* life? Not true life, not valid life as a human being in this world so deeply loved by God, but everlasting life that cannot be destroyed by death.

It happens regularly. I sit down with my computer to do some work – draft a sermon, outline an adult forum, write a report for Session, write something – and suddenly the silly machine slows to a crawl. Windows is starting an update to fix some vulnerability in its system, to install a security patch. The patch is just what the familiar word implies. When I was boy, my mother sometimes sewed knee patches on the jeans I wore to play because I was continually ripping the knees out of them, usually by falling as I ran full speed down the street in front of our house. Otherwise, I would have had an expensive collection of perfectly good jeans with torn knees. Of course, climbing trees and many other things that could be scrambled up didn't help, either. A computer is much the same. Someone finds a vulnerability, a weak spot in the security system that can be ripped open so a thief or vandal can sneak in. Usually, the installation of the patch is done quickly, and after restarting the system, I'm back to work.

The man who questions Jesus is hoping for a security patch – yes, a major one, but still just a patch. Jesus first offers him the security of trusting God within the covenant relationship God has with Israel. *You know the commandments*, the way of life that is responsive to God's love and mercy. But right there something changes. The man who has, perhaps, been mildly annoying and probably out of place among Jesus' disciples in his finer clothing and, I suspect, more refined speech somehow touches Jesus' heart.

Jesus has come insisting upon a completely new and drastically different operating system for life: not a security patch, a fix for some vulnerability – not even one as awful as death – but a new operating system for life under a very different set of conditions and assumptions. But, lest we dismiss this comfortably wealthy man as a spoiled rich guy who's just trying to have it all and heaven too, Mark tells us Jesus “loved him.” Biblically, love is an action that can mean to look upon someone with kindness rather than contempt, to choose not to reject, to treat with respect and compassion. Jesus does not dismiss this man as a type but sees him as a particular person and calls him to the new life of discipleship.

Still, the man needs the new operating system and not just a security patch against the vulnerability of having a mortal body. The past does not disappear, but it needs to be seen from a completely different perspective that takes life in new directions. The man's money and his “great possessions” are not, in themselves, the issue, but they are foundationally supportive of a way of life Jesus now calls this man to leave behind. This situation, though it seems the very opposite, is not really any different from the one in which God called the Hebrew slaves to leave behind, not only the fact of their enslavement in Egypt, but the whole system of attitudes and self-perceptions that went with being slaves. We call it the “slave mentality,” and the Israelites needed to leave that slave mentality behind, which was a much harder task than just physically following Moses out of Egypt. God took the people out of slavery, but it was much harder for God to take the slavery out of the people.

Why does Jesus observe that it is so very hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God? It's much easier to persuade someone at least to want to leave behind the conditions of poverty, enslavement, pain, and humiliation than to persuade another person to want to leave behind the conditions of wealth, comfort, and pride. The poor and shamed at least think they want this new operating system, even though, yes, it can be very hard to leave behind the mentality of the humiliated and the childish securities of the enslaved. The Israelites were ready to return, at the first hint of distress, to the "flesh pots" of Egypt where they were fed like children. It's hard for the put-down to learn to stand up for themselves but still respect others and not carry a chip on the shoulder. But at least the poor see the need for radical change. They are not so quick to reject the very idea of the new operating system, even though they struggle to learn to use it. For the rich and comfortable, the whole idea of drastic change is frightening. *Sorry, Jesus, I wasn't asking for that much change. I just wanted to protect my good life from the ultimate tragedy of death. I wasn't looking for a fresh start but just for an insurance policy against having it all end.*

The churches are at a crossroad. We cannot keep patching the old operating system; we need a new one with a drastically different sense of self, of mission, and of relation to the world. But individually also we stand confronted by Jesus who calls us to abandon the old operating system, stop just trying to patch it, accept the new operating system and start learning to use it. What in particular we need to leave behind depends upon the distinctive realities of your life or mine. The poor, the grief-stricken, and the humbled are blessed for two reasons: (1) it's much easier for them to want to leave the old behind, and (2) God wants to give them something so much better. It's harder for the well-situated because (1) what they have is harder to want to leave behind, and (2) it's more difficult for them to see that what God would give them really is better than what they have now. I suppose this love of the good life under the old operating system explains why comfortable people often need to be disturbed deeply, maybe even shocked, before they can take Jesus' call seriously. There are more than enough griefs and distresses people suffer in this world to move us, make us care, and teach us to want the new order of redemptive love. If we can see beyond ourselves, we can learn compassion, but we love because God has first loved us. Trouble by itself does not teach us what we need to know but can turn us bitter, suspicious, and even hateful. It is when God's grace meets our bitterness with understanding and overcomes our suspicions with love and hope that we are opened to this new operating system that changes everything.

Our next hymn understands Jesus' call from the fisherman's point of view. It doesn't talk about operating systems but about leaving the fishing boat behind to follow Jesus and seek a different sea. "O Lord, with your eyes you have searched me, and, while smiling, have called out my name." Listen to the hymn and think of the reading from Mark. It is a wondrous if sometimes scary thing to be seen and understood by redemptive love. Amen.