

What Is Getting In Your Way?

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, September 27, 2009 Mark10:17-27

Economically, times are tough, no doubt about it. Unemployment is up, stock prices and real estate values are down, and many people are struggling. Some have wanted to make comparisons between this crisis and the Great Depression that began 70 years ago. Historians, however, caution against leaping to the conclusion that, as Yogi Berra might put it, “It’s deja vu all over again.”

Price Fishback, an economic historian, helps us put it in perspective. For example, unemployment is currently at its highest point in a couple of decades, at just under 10%. During the Great Depression, the unemployment rate was above 14% for ten years, and over 20% for four of those years! Likewise, the stock market has dropped precipitously in recent years. It is down 40% from its peak in 2007. But in the Great Depression, the stock market lost an astounding 90%! In short, argues Fishback, the economy is bad, but it is not a second Great Depression by any means.

One consequence of the fact that this crisis is less severe is that we are less likely to learn any permanent lessons from it. Most analysts doubt that people will be changed as they were changed by the Great Depression. I’m sure many of you could tell similar stories, but I remember when we cleaned out my grandparents’ house that we found stacks and stacks of things they had kept that we would have never thought about keeping. For instance, we found stacks of 30-year-old waxed cardboard cottage cheese cartons that my grandmother had washed out and saved “just in case.” In the basement we found box after box and jar after jar of bent and rusty used nails and fence post staples, as well as rusty screws, bolts and nuts.

The Great Depression changed millions of people permanently. They stopped taking things for granted. They learned to keep, repair and reuse. In some ways, they were ahead of their time – recycling before recycling was even a word. But many who lived through Great Depression also learned a less beneficial lesson – they learned to live in fear of it happening again, and thus to cling to and grasp things in ways that prevented them from actually using and enjoying (or sharing) them. If there is spiritual danger in being too careless about what we possess (and there is – after all, Jesus taught his followers to “count well the cost”), there is also spiritual danger in being too careful and in grasping too tightly. When the things we are called to care for and use for God’s glory and our neighbors’ good begin to dominate our

consciousness and focus all our energy, we are in trouble. When the things we “own” begin to own us, we are in spiritual peril.

That is the central lesson in today’s text, a story from the Gospel of Mark about a wealthy young man who comes to Jesus. While Jesus is setting out on a journey, this young man rushes up and actually kneels before him. The young man clearly respects Jesus as a religious teacher and has a religious question for him: “What must I do to have eternal life?” Jesus’ answer may surprise us. He speaks first about the commandments. Obey the commandments and you will have eternal life, he says. The reply of the young man is that he has always obeyed the commandments. By this he does not mean that he has never sinned, but rather that he has made every effort not to sin and when he has failed, he has followed the commandments regarding repentance.

Still, somehow, he lacks confidence in eternal life. He does not have peace about it. He remains unsure.

Jesus is moved by the young man’s sincerity. The text even says Jesus “loved him.” And because he loved him, Jesus offered him the chance to obtain the confidence, peace and assurance he does not have. “You lack one thing,” Jesus says. “Go, sell all you have, give the proceeds to the poor; then come and follow me.” The sad ending to the story is that the young man is not able to do what Jesus asks. Faced squarely with the choice between spiritual peace and financial security, he chooses financial security. He can’t let go.

Lots of people have trouble letting go. After all, we spend so much of our time and energy learning to get and hold on to things. Our culture celebrates accumulation. We marvel at the mansions of the rich and famous, the ostentatious lifestyles of celebrities and sports figures. We consider people “successful” if they are wealthy. We are taught to seek meaning in buying things. Shopping is a chief source of fulfillment for many people.

And so much of the world is designed to reinforce the idea that buying things is how we should find fulfillment. Take something as ordinary as a trip to the grocery store. You’ve carefully filled your cart with the needed items outlined on your list. You patiently wait in line, always seeming to pick the one that’s slowest. Yet somehow, by the time the checker begins tallying up the items in your cart, it has suddenly filled up with a pack of gum, a box of Tic-Tacs, a new TV Guide, a four-pack of AA batteries, three candy bars and a magazine for enquiring minds.

If your 5-year-old is along, you may also have accumulated a new Pez dispenser, a mylar balloon with a Disney character on it and a plastic "cellular" telephone filled with tiny bubble-gum pieces. Stores purposefully pack this kind of junky, funky, consumer gunk into the narrow gauntlet we must run to get to the checkout counter. Things we would never intentionally have gone in search of now languish under our fingertips -- inviting, no insisting, that we grab them.

Although impulsively buying a pack of gum or a candy bar hardly seems earth-shattering or soul-threatening, the truth is that the increasingly voracious appetites of this consumer culture are being methodically nurtured and stimulated by a crass and crushing consumerism.

As long as we are fixated on getting more, there is little chance for us to hear or heed Jesus' message, which is that we need to let go even of what we already have! Letting go is just that. It does not mean throwing away. It means putting to good use – God's use – what we have. People often misinterpret this text by failing to pay attention to Jesus' full instructions. Jesus tells the young man to sell all he has and to give the proceeds to help the poor. Jesus doesn't consider money evil, merely powerful and thus dangerous. The power of money can be used to accomplish God's will, and that is how Jesus tells the young man to use his wealth.

Jesus does not call us to simply abandon our wealth or to run away from our riches. Jesus calls us to use what we have wisely and well, according to God's will rather than according to our own.

But, of course, that requires letting go, which is precisely what the young man could not do. Figuratively speaking, he could not unclench his fist in order to be open to what God could do with his resources. Thus, he walked away shocked and grieving.

We should not be too harsh in our judgement of this man. Yes, he failed a test, but it was a very, very difficult test. He was asked to do something contrary to instinct. Our instinct is to clutch, grasp, and hold on for dear life when we have something of great worldly value. Our culture tells us that it is our valuables that make us valuable, that self-worth is tied to net worth, that the one who dies with the most toys wins. So it is extremely difficult to act against instinct and culture. It is extremely difficult to let go.

Extremely difficult, yes; impossible, no. One man who did take the "cure" offered by Jesus, who took up the challenge to divest himself of a remarkable fortune, was a quiet, virtually unknown New Jersey Irishman. Charles F. Feeney, just happened to be worth somewhat over 3.5 billion dollars. Committed to living a simpler, less consumptive

lifestyle, this rich man gradually, almost furtively, gave away nearly all of it without many knowing about it. At last count, he has given away \$3.547 billion. All he has kept for himself was one half of one percent of his entire estate for his "old age." Feeney himself owns no house, no car, and lives a simple, unremarkable lifestyle.

So it can be done. But there is more to this text. It isn't just about putting our wealth, great or small, at God's disposal. It is about what faith really is, what it requires. Faith requires letting go. That goes all the way back to Abraham, who was asked to let go of his past – to leave home and kindred to seek a promised land. It goes back to the commandments, which say, "You shall have no other gods before me," which is a way of saying we must be willing to let go of everything else so that God and God alone can have first place in our lives. It goes back to the prophets, who warned the Israelites to let go of the notion that nothing bad could ever happen to them and grasp the message that God desired righteousness more than sacrifice. And it goes back to Jesus, who called his disciples away from home and kindred to follow. They left nets and boats, tax booths, and who knows what else to follow. They let go in order to let God be first in their lives.

Jesus did the rich young man a great favor by pointing out clearly what was getting in his way as he sought peace, confidence, and assurance. Jesus pointed out that as long as he thought he needed his wealth to have a worthwhile life, he would never have a worthwhile life. He would never be free.

Are you free? Are you living the life you want to live? Do you have peace, confidence, and assurance? I hope so. But if not, I know who can help you. Jesus can help you, through the Holy Spirit. Seek out his wisdom through prayer. Ask the Spirit to reveal to you what it is that is getting in your way.

And when you find out what it is, pray for God's help to do what you have to do to let it go. And don't be afraid, however difficult it may seem at first. Because with God's help, all things are possible.

Amen.