

Proper 23 B
October 13, 2024
Mark 10:17-22

What We Hold Onto
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¹⁷As [Jesus] was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁸Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” ²⁰He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” ²¹Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” ²²When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

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A few years ago, the Los Angeles Times ran a piece that begins with a question: What treasure would you save if a natural disaster struck?

One person interviewed for the story, an Atlanta attorney responded, “If there’s a fire, what am I going in there for? I’ve thought about that...Kids and wife. And then – my pillow. If you’re 35 and you’ve been sleeping on the same pillow for 31 years, you don’t take that lightly.”

This isn’t a joke to the lawyer, or to the many other adults who are

deeply attached to the cushions that lull them to sleep each night. Before getting married, the lawyer told his fiancée, “My pillow is really important to me.” She laughed, so he reiterated: “No, I’m not kidding. This is really important.” Despite the occasional joke about security blankets, “she has actually been very respectful of it,” he says. “She knows what I’m like without it.”

A number of noted sources say that a pillow attachment like this one, which apparently many people share, is a healthy alternative to addictions and vices. Chiropractors and allergists tend to disagree.¹

Our text from Mark’s Gospel has something to say to us about attachments. Perhaps you think it silly or unsanctimonious to make a comparison between a pillow attachment and our text from Holy Scripture. Nonetheless, I see a striking similarity. The young man in our story, sincere in his quest for eternal life, asked Jesus what more he could do to inherit it. After telling Jesus that he’d followed the law since childhood, Jesus told him that there was just one more thing he needed to do – sell everything he had, give the money to the poor, and follow him. The young man left, shocked and disappointed. If there had been a fire in his house, the young man in Mark’s Gospel would have gone back for his wealth. That’s attachment.

This text has been, and continues to be, fodder for much thought among Christians. It makes us uncomfortable. It’s uncomfortable to read, uncomfortable to hear, uncomfortable to preach! Mostly, I think that’s because we’re afraid of what Jesus might ask of us.

Time and time again, the Jesus of the Gospels tells his listeners that his purpose is to proclaim the Kingdom of God – the

¹Steven Barrie-Anthony. “There’s a lot of fluff to these relationships,” LATimes.com, January 20, 2005: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2005-jan-20-hm-pillows20-story.html>.

commonwealth of divine sharing and heavenly peace wherein all God's children live and thrive in harmony and as full expressions of their divine purpose. Jesus knew that the young man in Mark's Gospel could never experience this kind of abundant life as long as his attachment was to his wealth.

The French have a story that I think helps illustrate this point. There once was a rich man who lived in a palace and spent his days counting his gold. Beside the palace, there lived a poor cobbler who spent his days singing as he repaired people's shoes. The joyful singing irritated the rich man. One day he decided to give some gold coins to the cobbler. At first the cobbler was overjoyed, and he took the coins and hid them, but worried that they might be stolen, so he went back to check on the coins. He worried further that someone had seen him bury them so he reburied them in another place. He continued to worry, hide, check, and rebury the coins and with all this preoccupation, he stopped singing. When he realized his predicament, he took the coins back to the rich man and said, "Take back your coins and give me back my songs." His attachment to the coins took away the cobbler's freedom and joy and kept him from truly living the abundant, but materially poor, life he lived before.²

The Vietnamese Buddhist monk, teacher, author, poet and peace activist, Thich Nhat Hanh once said that, "Letting go gives us freedom and freedom is the only condition for happiness." That, I believe, was the spirit of Jesus' message to the young man. We cannot be truly happy when we are in bondage to anything – even our wealth.

Seeking answers about the nature of human attachment to material wealth, author and Harvard professor Dr. Arthur C. Brooks sought

² "Take Back Your Coins and Give Me Back My Songs," Frtonyshomilies.com, October 13, 2024: <https://frtonyshomilies.com/2024/10/05/o-t-28-b-oct-13-2024-sunday-homily/>.

out the wisdom of a Hindu holy man on a trip to India. The holy man is a former resident of Houston, Texas, is university educated with an MBA and was making lots of money when he had a spiritual awakening that resulted in six years of study at a Hindu seminary and the decision to become a monk. From that moment on, the sum total of his worldly possessions has been two robes, prayer beads and a wooden bowl.

When they met, Brooks asked him: “[Teacher], is economic prosperity a good or bad thing?” “It’s good,” the teacher replied. “It has saved millions of people in my country from starvation.” “But you own almost nothing,” Brooks pressed. “I was sure you’d say that money is corrupting.” The teacher laughed. “There is nothing wrong with money. The problem in life is attachment to money.” The formula for a good life, he explained, is simple: abundance without attachment.³

Therein lies the crux of Jesus’ message to the young man in Mark’s Gospel and Jesus’ message to us today. Abundant life is not about attachment – to material resources, to the law, or to a particular view of oneself as a good person. Abundant life is freedom from all those attachments to be the person we’re meant to be. It was a hard word for the young man to hear and it’s not much easier for us either.

If Jesus were among us here and now today, in the flesh, what attachments would he urge us to let go of in order that we too might experience true life abundant? Jesus offered the young man freedom from the attachment that was imprisoning him and as a wise man once said, “freedom is the only condition for true happiness.” Jesus’ offer still stands... Amen.

³Arthur C. Brooks. “Abundance Without Attachment,” NYtimes.com, December 12, 2014:
https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/14/opinion/sunday/arthur-c-brooks-abundance-without-attachment.html?_r=0.