

## No one said it would be easy...

[Augsburg University Chapel, October 2, 2019]

Matthew 19:16-22 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

### The Rich Young Man

<sup>16</sup> Then someone came to him and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" <sup>17</sup> And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." <sup>18</sup> He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; <sup>19</sup> Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>20</sup> The young man said to him, "I have kept all these; <sup>[a]</sup> what do I still lack?" <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money <sup>[b]</sup> to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." <sup>22</sup> When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

I'm still on this vocation theme journey and I have to say that this morning's gospel reading problematizes things quite a bit. Give it all up – are you kidding me? That is not going to be a winning argument in our efforts to lift up vocational discernment as the heart of our work in this university.

But then I am reminded of a conversation I had a few years ago with a senior Augsburg student. I had been describing my understanding of vocation – it is often found in the mundane details of life; it has history and a narrative quality; it is both individual and social; and finally, it may require sacrifice to the unexpected. When he stopped me after class, he said that he had not heard in his four years at Augsburg the possibility that his calling may be sacrificial. He then described how his own journey had been in response to the expectations others had of him – to be successful, to make money, to climb the ladder – while his own aspirations were more about working with disadvantaged communities and being a good neighbor. His true calling, he believed, would take him to unexpected places and he wondered how to make sense of that surprising possibility.

Now, as many of you know, I am an ethicist by way of academic training and ethicists have a thing for rules. And our gospel reading starts with reference to one of the most iconic sets of rules ever articulated – the Ten Commandments, no less. Here is Jesus in conversation with the so-called rich young man; a young man seeking guidance on his own vocational journey all the way to eternal life – now that is a high calling! And Jesus shares what any good rabbi would prescribe – keep the commandments. I like that.

But it gets tricky when the young man proclaims that he has met that standard, so he asks what is it that I lack? And Jesus then sets the bar at its highest when he replies – give up all of your

earthly possessions and follow me. To which the young man cannot agree and he goes away, grieving, the gospel writer tells us. Grieving because discipleship, following our true calling, demanded all of him – as it does for all of us. It is unexpected, surprising, jarring, sacrificial even – and we too often walk away grieving when we believe we cannot follow.

For those of us who claim the Christian faith, here is the central tension in our lives. How do we reconcile the call to be disciples of Jesus Christ with the ways of the world all around us? How do we live faithfully even as we pursue success and recognition? Too often, we're just like the rich young man – proud of ourselves for following the rules, surely that makes us good and deserving Christians – but give it all up to journey on this unexpected path, we're not so sure?

The German Lutheran theologian and pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, famously named this tension as a battle between what he called “cheap grace” – doing what we think is enough to earn God's favor – and “costly grace” – giving it all up and following Jesus. Bonhoeffer himself made the ultimate sacrifice with his life in following his call to resist the tyranny of Adolf Hitler. That sacrifice – as we know from Bonhoeffer's many writings and sermons – was grounded in his belief that discipleship means that we have no choice but to follow Jesus wherever he leads. It was, for Bonhoeffer, about Jesus Christ as the center of his life.

And here, I believe, Bonhoeffer offers us a way to understand our gospel as a roadmap to our lives of faith. As people of faith, we must read this gospel account backwards. It is Jesus's ultimate claim on the rich young man – to give it all up and follow him – that is the leap of faith we are called to make. Jesus asks us to make him the center of our lives. Christ as our center now arrays everything else we do – every aspect of our calls we follow – as what it means to be disciples. So, following the Ten Commandments, for example, is not the means to eternal life, it is the life we lead because we are disciples of the Christ, because Christ is our center.

So what does this “centered life” look like? Here we have the wise guidance of our colleague, Jack Fortin, who serves in the Christensen Center for Vocation, and who has written powerfully about the centered life.

Jack points out that one of the great myths the world seeks to impose on us in our lives is the sense that we must learn to “balance” all of the competing claims we will face. The balanced life demands keeping work and family, private and public, personal and common in some sort of eternal symmetry. It might even mean following the rules, even as we skirt the higher demands of our faith. We long to find the balance in our lives that makes all right with the world. But this is a futile longing, as we all know and experience.

Instead, we must seek the centered life. Finding our center holds us in a different orbit, one where our core beliefs and values are a hub around which all of our various roles and commitments are arrayed.

With Christ as our center, our callings are all about discipleship – no matter where they take us. With Christ as our center, our priorities are rearranged. We are equipped to love our neighbors, to free the captives, to feed the hungry, to heal the sick, to console the grieving...

As Bonhoeffer himself discovered in his final days in prison before being executed, with Christ as our center, the question of who am I becomes whose am I? [Excerpts from poem]

I think about what this understanding of the centered life might mean for my Augsburg student, struggling with attempting to balance the expectations of others – parents, teachers, the world – with his own discernment of what might be seen as unexpected or sacrificial. He was on his way to medical school, as I recall, thinking that this was a path to a good living and status in the eyes of the world. What if, instead, his center was to follow Jesus? He still goes on to medical school, but he now sees the ways in which his calling to a particular profession is in service to a higher calling – a calling to use your gifts and knowledge and experience to meet the needs of those who suffer in mind, body and spirit – a calling that may seem sacrificial in the eyes of the world, but that in fact is just what God expects of God’s faithful people.

So, what is your center? Who are you? Whose are you? Here is the question Jesus poses for the rich young man. The answer we give makes all the difference. Thanks be to God. Amen.

### **“Who am I?”**

By Dietrich Bonhoeffer (March 4, 1945)

Who am I? They often tell me  
I would step from my cell’s confinement  
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,  
like a squire from his country-house.

Who am I? They often tell me  
I would talk to my warders  
freely and friendly and clearly,  
as though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me  
I would bear the days of misfortune  
equably, smilingly, proudly,  
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?  
Or am I only what I know of myself?  
restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,  
struggling for breath, as though hands were  
compressing my throat,  
yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds,  
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,  
trembling in expectation of great events,

powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,  
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,  
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

Who am I? This or the other?  
Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?  
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,  
and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?  
Or is something within me still like a beaten army,  
fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.  
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine.

–Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Who am I?” in *Letters & Papers From Prison* (New York: Touchstone, 1953/1997), 347-8.