

HOW MUCH ARE YOU WILLING TO CHANGE?

Mark 10: 17-31

How much are you willing to change? If something isn't right, if something is troubling you in some way, if what's happening around you is convicting you to do something, say something, learn something, engage in some way... How much are you willing to change? I guess it depends on how much change is required, no? How much will you have to give up and let go? How much are you attached to right now in your life in terms of what you have and your beliefs and perspectives? How do you let that go and how do you come to terms with how such attachments may also affect others in the world adversely because they don't have what you have? What if the privileges you have are part of a system that neglects, excludes and oppresses others?

Now I ask such questions also recognizing that however much we are prepared to change ourselves, if people out there are not prepared to change, little may change in our world as a whole. But what I want to zero in in this sermon is the change we have greater power to make – in ourselves. How will that make a difference not only for us, but in the world around us too?

It's hard for us in our individualist western world to see how everything about us and our lives is also interconnected with a larger whole. Any choice we make in terms of our lifestyles, our relationships and our day to day practices have some effect on something or someone else in this universe. If we believe in God and if we believe that God is interconnected with all life in this universe as creative energy, then our relationship with God is also interconnected with our life-in-relationship to all life in the world.

OK. Preacher. That's a whole lot of pressure. That makes us all super responsible, especially if we're on the side of privilege in the world. If you've got very little and if you've suffered great injustice, then change will open up some hope that things can get better. But if you've got a lot and if you feel fairly safe, comfortable and happy with things right now, then change can feel scary and unsettling. Some of us would rather pretend, forget, escape and create a narrative of history, our world and the broader life-style and culture we're a part of that says that we are good people doing good in the world and the bad people and problems in the world are out there somewhere and not here among us.

Well, here I am to tell you and to tell myself, too, that change is something we must all face, and by change I don't mean what happens to you beyond your control. No. I'm talking about the change we can make by the choices available to us in our lives right now. How can we make some change for good in this world with the privilege we have – some of us more and some of us less?

Think about sports teams and players like those in the NBA among others, boycotting a few games to make a statement. Think about all the protests happening in the U.S and in this city too. How far are we prepared to go and how far are we prepared to get unsettled in our comfort and privilege in the fact that for some of us the system works out pretty well? While various athletes were speaking out about why they couldn't play their games, the Republican party was hosting their re-election campaign with speeches that called for greater law and order because change meant a threat to the way things are. Wanting change means you hate your country and you hate the traditions and institutions that have made it so great. Being patriotic and a good citizen means embracing rather than criticizing your country. You have to hold on to your privilege even if it means shutting down all resistance and protest. Really?

When Martin Luther King Jr began his work as an activist, he sought to join with white allies because he believed that change was not possible until blacks and whites came together. But as he faced roadblock after roadblock to change over time, he became disillusioned. Unless you are personally affected by the lack of change, you will not have the passion to keep pushing for change. Privilege means you support peaceful protests and calls for justice so long as law and order are maintained and so long as your own life isn't disrupted too much. Here's what MLKJ wrote while in jail: "I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. The Negro's great stumbling block in his stride for freedom is not... the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than justice. Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will." Wow! What an indictment on so many of us who mean well, so long as our lives don't have to change too much.

How do we affirm that "black lives matter" if we're not prepared to change? And what about indigenous lives matter, given our history as Canadians? And what about the Me-too movement shining a light on vast inequality, exploitation, violence and abuse toward women? And what about LGBTQI2S freedom, equality and full inclusion? As we inch along toward such inclusion in our own Presbyterian Church in Canada, there are plenty among us who want to proceed with caution, wanting to maintain decency and order, afraid of division. This is the language of privilege. Those persecuted and excluded are already feeling

the separation, exclusion, abuse and vulnerability rather than safety and comfort. Context is everything.

OK, preacher, so how do we identify and recognize privilege, those of us who have it in various ways, and work with it in a positive way that is prepared for change towards greater justice?

Let's dive into our scripture reading in search of divine revelation and guidance. Jesus encounters a man, a good man. He comes to Jesus with reverence, kneeling before him. He calls him teacher and is sincere. He asks Jesus: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Eternal life is not life after death. Eternal life is fullness of life now. This man doesn't just want to live. He wants to live fully alive. He wants a life of real meaning and purpose. He wants to really make a difference for good rather than just live in his little cocoon of privilege with those few others who are just like him.

Well, Jesus says to him, what does our religious law teach? The man knows the answer. He recites the 10 commandments and he claims in all sincerity that he is conscientious in trying to live them all. He is conscientious in trying to love God and neighbour, in worshipping at the synagogue and going to the temple to offer sacrifices. He's a good philanthropist too, giving generously to the poor. But clearly, something is missing in him. He's living but not thriving. Everything's great on the outside, but inside, he's struggling.

Theologian Douglas Hall calls this inner struggling: 'covert despair.' Overt despair is what those persecuted, marginalized, impoverished and abused suffer. Their despair is on the outside for all to see. But those of us with privilege who seem so together and with it, successful and happy on the outside, often struggle within in ways we are not comfortable sharing or exposing. We want to control and manage our vulnerability and brokenness, not let it out, revealing to the world that we are as needy and broken as anyone else without the comforts and privilege that provide us with protective cover and the façade of happiness. Scratch the surface a little and what darkness may be revealed in us? How may we fall apart?

This man is living covert despair. Why covert? Well, on the outside he's got everything. He's a good man with a solid reputation. Life is good. We're also told that Jesus loved him. Why? Because he seemed so genuine and sincere. But inside, he was in trouble. He was unhappy. He wanted more out of life than all the things he could buy and do with his money. He couldn't shut off the misery in the world around him and how his privilege meant others were excluded, oppressed and suppressed for him to have his outwardly comfortable life. But here's the thing. The more you have and the more you're attached to what you have,

the harder it is to give it up and let it go if that's what it takes to take your life to another level of fullness. If you want 'eternal' life, staying comfortable and safe at all costs cannot work.

Jesus' prescription for the man's healing and liberation of soul is not about waving a magic wand, giving him a quick and easy answer. No. Jesus knows that unless he's ready for some major change in his life, he will never discover the eternal life he's so desperate to find. His life is so packed in with attachments and privilege, he is trapped. He'd rather stay unfulfilled in his life than discover the courage to change it, trusting that what he gains from letting go and giving up what he has will bring him so much more than he has ever known with all his attachment to his privilege. And so, the man leaves Jesus, unfulfilled.

But Jesus' disciples don't get it. They don't see the man's despair because it's hidden, covert. They see a man who has everything – money, power and a great reputation. Who doesn't want all that? But what if getting all that means you turn your back on the injustice of the world as it is because the system works for you. Jesus tells his disciples that the kingdom of God is a sphere of relationships where justice and equality reign, totally opposite to a world where some have privilege and power while others are excluded, persecuted and impoverished. The last shall be first and the first shall be last in the kingdom of God. Is that a threat to them? To you and me?

Well, most of us are not wealthy, nor are we poor in comparison to the world's standards. Many of us aspire to something more, like the disciples. Many of us want to smile on the outside, look and feel successful, happy, with it, in control. But unless and until we begin engage our own fear, doubts, questioning, and yes, despair at times, we will never take a step of faith in willing to risk whatever privilege we benefit from in society so we can see things from the point of view of those marginalized, excluded, impoverished and persecuted because of the colour of their skin, their culture, language, religion, gender or sexuality. Unless we are ready to put it all on the line, we will never be genuine allies. Unless we take step after step past our protective privilege, we will never be ready for full inclusion in our sphere of relationships.

So what does that mean more practically for us? What do we have to change in our lives? What commitments, generosity and life-style changes can we begin to make, even in small increments, so that we bear witness that we can follow Jesus? Or, will we like the man in the story turn away in our despair because we are afraid of letting go, giving up and changing our privilege into more just relationships where others have more of what we have – more

resources, more acceptance, more respect, more food and clothing and shelter, more power to make a better life for themselves?

We can do something, or we can do nothing. Doing something and doing nothing are both choices. What choices will you make to bear witness in your life that black lives matter, indigenous lives matter, LGBTQI2S lives matter, the life of those poor and on the street matter, that all those racialized and mistreated, murdered and missing matter, that this fragile planet earth matters, which includes animals and plants, air and water? Do we recognize the hidden, covert despair in ourselves even as we're great at smiling and being positive? Are we prepared for what it will take to take our lives to the next level of fullness? Will we pray that God reveal to us choices we can make today even though they will cost us something of our privilege?

May God awaken us, activate us, and empower us with new resolve and new courage to follow Jesus in this time and place we are living... Amen.