“What Must I Do?”

Mark 10:17-31

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When I was in 8th grade, the Columbine shootings happened at a high school far away in Colorado, an event perpetrated by two high schoolers, not more than a few years older than me, an event that abruptly brought an end to a relatively safe and secure childhood. School used to be a safe place, and now, all of a sudden, it might not be. Now, I looked at my classmates with suspicion. Could any of them be harboring the same dark thoughts as the two students at that high school in Colorado?

In the midst of these new worries that I’m sure were shared by middle and high school students and their teachers around the country, a book came out about one of the victims of Columbine.  The book was called, “She Said Yes” and told the story of Cassie Bernall, who was only 17 years old when she died. According to the book, right before she was killed, she was asked if she believed in God. When she replied that she did, the gunman took her life.

Now, there has been some controversy around the book and whether or not this account is true. There are differing stories about the moments before Cassie died that day. There had been a lot of chaos in the library that day and so perhaps the account had been falsely attributed to her.

I actually didn’t know that there are differing stories until I did some reading on it this week.  The reason why I knew of the book is because my aunt got it for me.

In 1999, when Columbine occurred and when “She Said Yes” was published, many Christians in the United States were feeling a sense of panic in regard to Christianity’s place within America.  The cultural demographic was changing.  Church attendance was declining.  Violence around the world made everything feel slightly out of control.  Throw in a global pandemic and you’ve got how we might feel today.

Fundamentalist-based organizations like Focus on the Family were hitting their peak at about this time with programs like “The National Day of Prayer” and “See You at the Pole” - a program that encouraged students to meet at the flagpole one morning a year to join together in prayer before the school day started. These groups focused on putting prayer back in the schools, protecting the traditional nuclear family, and teaching apologetics to teenagers.

It’s this last bit that has always been troubling to me. Apologetics is a branch of Christian theology that defends Christianity against possible objections. Teenagers from more conservative branches of Christianity were often taught to defend their faith against arguments that might question any of the basic tenets of the Christian faith.  They are basically taught to anticipate an argument and be ready, prepared, and armed to defend their faith.  For those of you who have read any of Rachel Held Evans’ work, this is the tradition in which she was raised and from which she strove to re-educate herself and those who had also grown up in similar traditions.

I am thankful that I grew up in a tradition that encouraged questioning. I was always allowed to ask questions if I wanted to at church, in youth group, in Sunday school.  But some of those apologetics-like teachings still managed to find me and instead of strengthening my faith as they were possibly intended, managed to make me question God’s love for me.

Books like “She Said Yes” and the like, instead of teaching me about the love of God, taught me to fear God. The message I received from the book — whether it was intended or not — was that Cassie Bernall had the right answer on that incredibly awful day, and that even though it cost her her life, she was now in heaven. It struck fear in me that at some point, I might also have to answer that question in a similar circumstance and what if I didn’t have the strength to say yes? What if I was a coward and denied my love of God? Would God condemn me to hell?  Even worse, did God put her in that position in the first place to see what her answer would be?

When we hear about people like Cassie Bernall or Dietrich Bonhoeffer who put his faith ahead of his own personal safety to the point of death — when we hear about these folks and think about their circumstances as true tests of faith, we cheat ourselves from having to do any kind of true introspection around our own beliefs.  These folks that we read about are definitely worth considering for their sacrifices, their words, and their actions and it is good for us to consider their lives and how we might learn from them and how our faith might be strengthened through studying their commitments to God.

But thankfully and God-willing, we most likely will never be in situations like Cassie’s or Bonhoeffer’s.  So in addition to studying the great martyrs of the faith, we might also turn our attention to scripture passages like the one for today which tell us that we do still have an opportunity to declare our faith daily — in small ways that might not always makes us very comfortable.

In today’s Scripture passage, the rich man asks Jesus a question of his own, maybe not anticipating the full depth of Jesus’s answer. His question is one that has been asked for centuries. He wasn’t the first and he won’t be the last.  “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

He approaches Jesus with this question and I have to wonder what he thought the answer might be. A secret formula?  A commandment that has been hidden from the rabbis and teachers? Maybe he did think that the solution would be monetary-based, but perhaps he thought Jesus would give him a number.  Maybe he thought Jesus would say to him, “Donate x amount of money to the poor or to the temple, and you’re good to go, my friend!”

But instead, Jesus recites commandments that the man already knows. He tells the man about the big commandments regarding human interaction: don’t murder. Don’t lie. Don’t defraud. Love your parents.

This is not the answer that the man is expecting. Surely, there has to be more.

And there is.

Jesus hits him where it hurts — his wallet. And Jesus knows that this is going to hurt. The text tells us that before Jesus answers him, he looks at him. The Greek word here for “look” means more of a “locked-in gaze.” Jesus stares at the man intently, with genuine interest. His response isn’t going to be flippant. He is going to take this man seriously and genuinely answer the question and he knows it’s going to be hard for the man to hear. But because he loves him — the text tell us that! — because he loves him, he has to tell him.

Theologian Debie Thomas writes that, “For Jesus, love is surgical; it cuts in order to heal. Precisely because he loves the young man so much, Jesus tells him the truth. Not the half-truth, not the watered-down truth, but the whole truth: ‘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.’"

The man is shocked, and goes away grieving, for he knows that what Jesus has asked him to do will be harder than anything he’s ever had to do before.

I think when we read this passage, we assume that the man goes away sad because he’s already made the decision that he’s not going to follow Jesus’s instructions. We might assume that his love for money is greater than his love for God. And there’s probably a good chance that is exactly what happened.

But what if there’s a different outcome?  What if he went away, grieved all evening, tossed and turned all night, and then woke up the next morning and thought to himself, “I might as well try”?  What if, from that day on, he looked for opportunities to give away all that he had?  He had so many possessions.  There’s no way he could have gotten rid of everything in one day.

Maybe he woke up the next morning, and saw his neighbor, a widow living by herself, eating her breakfast at her kitchen table, using the same cracked plate, and drinking her coffee from the same cracked bowl. And maybe he boxed up a place setting or two that he was never going to use in the first place and took them over to her that afternoon.

Maybe he woke up a few days later and while on his way to work, saw a man standing on the corner with a sign that simply said, “Help.” Maybe the man was wearing tattered clothing, with holes in a coat that would never last another winter.  And so maybe the rich man went home and pulled out a barely worn coat of his own, grabbed some gloves and knit hats and scarves gave them to the man on the corner.

Maybe he woke up a few months later and over a game of checkers with an old friend, learned that the leaders of their congregation had noticed that there were a bunch of teenagers hanging out in the church parking lot every day after school, not causing trouble, but it still worried the leaders that these boys needed some structure.  And maybe the man then began organizing a capital campaign to build a gym on the church property so that the teens can have a rec center — a safe place to be after school. And maybe he donated the first check himself.

And maybe after a few years of just listening to his community, to a newly-found conscience in his head, to God, maybe the man found that he didn’t own quite as many possessions as before.  Maybe he found that in emptying himself of things, he had filled himself with something even more important — love for neighbor, love for himself, and love for God.

Saying yes to Christ isn’t always going to hinge on a big moment like Cassie Bernall’s final moments at Columbine or Dietrich Bonhoeffer hatching a plan to murder Hitler and save the German Church from the grips of Nazism.

Following Christ requires us to say yes daily, in small, often immeasurable ways.

We say yes when we bring peanut butter to church on Peanut Butter Sunday.

We say yes when we collect items for hurricane victims in Louisiana.

We say yes when we choose to support the small businesses in our community over companies like Amazon or Walmart.

We say yes when we make our pledges at the end of every stewardship season.

These aren’t grand gestures. And some of them force us to choose a small bit of discomfort over convenience. But they are all a part of saying yes to Christ.

And who knows? Maybe by providing peanut butter to a local family, we’re helping a middle schooler stay focused in her classes and on her schoolwork instead of on a grumbling belly. And maybe that middle schooler will grow up to cure cancer or win a Nobel peace prize.

Who knows? Maybe those hurricane buckets will go to Louisiana to help repair a nursing home that was devastated and now we’re helping to provide shelter to some of the most vulnerable folks in our nation.

Who knows? Maybe supporting that small business helps the business owner run an internship program, offering to teach valuable job skills to refugees newly arrived from Afghanistan.

Who knows what these small steps might amount to?

Who knows whether the rich man in our text succeeded in following Jesus’s instructions or not?

Who knows?

Well, God does.  We might never know.  But God knows.

All praise be to God.

Amen.