

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro  
17 March 2024

10:30 a.m. MT Worship  
Fifth Sunday in Lent

Calvary Baptist Church  
Denver, Colorado

## ***CHANGE: We Become Well When We Courageously Face Our Discomfort***

Fifth sermon in the Lenten series, *How DO We Become Well?*

### ***Mark 10:17-27***

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

*NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.*

#### **Chapter One**

*"I walk down the street.  
There is a deep hole in the  
sidewalk.  
I fall in.  
I am lost...I am helpless.  
It isn't my fault.  
It takes forever to find a way  
out.*

#### **Chapter Two**

*I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the  
sidewalk.  
I pretend I don't see it.  
I fall in again.  
I can't believe I am in the same  
place.  
But, it isn't my fault.  
It still takes me a long time to  
get out.*

#### **Chapter Three**

*I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the  
sidewalk.  
I see it is there.*

*I still fall in. It's a habit.  
My eyes are open.  
I know where I am.  
It is my fault. I get out  
immediately.*

#### **Chapter Four**

*I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the  
sidewalk.  
I walk around it.*

#### **Chapter Five**

*I walk down another street."*

This poem, entitled "*There is a Hole in My Sidewalk*," is written by singer, songwriter, actress, and author Portia Nelson. It beautifully and succinctly describes the stages of transformation in our lives.<sup>1</sup> And how long it can take us to change our ways.

Our pace of life is such that many of us live on autopilot. We repeat the same actions,

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<sup>1</sup> Robert T. Muller, "There is a Hole in My Sidewalk," *Trauma.Blog.YorkU.ca* (25 January 2021), accessed on March 17, 2024 at

<https://trauma.blog.yorku.ca/2021/01/there-is-a-hole-in-my-sidewalk/>.

expecting different results – which is said to be the ‘definition of insanity.’ The thing is, I think we repeat the same actions because they are the actions we are comfortable with and familiar with, they are what we know, what we’ve been taught, and it’s not that we want the same thing to keep happening over and over again – it’s just that we really hope that the next time we walk down that sidewalk, *someone* will have filled in the hole that we keep falling into! We want *someone else* to fix the hazard that keeps tripping us up. But often *we* are the ones who must change. If not our actions, our minds.

As Maya Angelou wisely said, “*If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude.*” Even if we cannot change our circumstances, we can change how we process and understand the circumstances we are in, involving our heart and mind to help us get to a place of transformation. Which reminds me of Reinhold Niebuhr’s Serenity Prayer:

*God, grant me the serenity  
to accept the things I cannot  
change,  
the courage to change the things  
I can,*

*and the wisdom to know the  
difference.*

*The Serenity Prayer* gets at the heart of the barrier that we are exploring today: *Change*. And what it takes to work through the discomfort change causes: *Courage*. And what we inevitably experience when we have the wisdom to employ that courage in the midst of change: *Serenity*, or *Peace*.

All this talk about change is a prelude to our text today which is about a man who is faced with making a major change in his life. While this passage no doubt is an indictment on unchecked and excessive wealth, today I invite us to read it on a more foundational level—as a Call to Change, a Call to Change something that will cause discomfort initially, and will need great heart, or courage, to achieve. (Remember the root of the word courage, *cour*, means ‘heart’). At different times in our lives, it will be clear to us that God (or our intuition or someone) is inviting us to make a change and we will have to decide how we handle that invitation. Do we avoid it or answer it? Do we give in and follow? Or grieve and flee?

The man in Mark 10 has many wonderful qualities. Given what little we know about him, we can presume positive intentions about his faithfulness and his desire to do what is right as Jewish man. Because of Matthew and Luke's accounts of this same story, we know this man is young and therefore assume his wealth most likely came from an inheritance, or is "family money."

Just as this man has inherited wealth on earth, he wants to figure out how to also 'inherit' heaven. The truth is, the man is asking a question about death, but Jesus—clever as he is!—answers him with a statement about life. Jesus says, "you know the commandments" and he rattles off a few. All Jews would have known that the commandments are key to faithful *living*. They don't have much of anything to do with death.

The man, who is faithful and obedient, tells Jesus he has kept all the commandments since his youth, and we have no reason to doubt that he has. Wouldn't you say, in general, that you have been a law-abiding, faithful

person most of your life? We like to think of ourselves in this light and so we assume the same for him.

We might imagine this man in our world today as someone who is from a prominent or well-off family, a graduate of all the right schools. He's worked hard on his resume and course load and after school curriculars. As Jewish New Testament Scholar Amy-Jill Levine writes, "This would-be disciple feels the need to excel, to do more than is expected. He wants the next challenge, and [yet] at the same time, he wants to be able to succeed without working too hard...He probably fully expected Jesus to answer his question with, 'You're doing just fine lad, keep up the good work, and you'll have no trouble living in this world or the next.'" <sup>2</sup> He wanted a Checklist; not a radical Call to Change.

It also seems, though, that he has an empty feeling inside of some sort. There is a longing, a desire for something deeper. Remember, HE sought Jesus out, after all. Jesus wasn't already teaching somewhere, this man ran up to Jesus and

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<sup>2</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *The Difficult Words of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to His Most Perplexing Teachings* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 2021), 8-9.

knelt before *him*. Clearly this man is earnest in his question; he's sensitive to the fragility of life and wanting to ensure he's prepared for whatever comes next. He seems responsible, good-intentioned. Even with all that he has, he still has some kind of hunger within him, even if he can't put his finger on it, or name quite what it is. *Can anyone relate?! I think it's a common human experience.*

Perhaps it is the vulnerability or this feeling of longing and seeking that causes Jesus to look at this man and *love him*. Mark writes in verse 20, "*Jesus, looking at him, loved him...*"

Amy-Jill Levine notes that the *only* time Mark mentions Jesus' love for an individual is in *this* text. Mark's gospel is stingy with the word love! It's mentioned when quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 ("you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength") and once with a citation of Leviticus 19:18 ("you shall love your neighbor as yourself") and then twice more as a gloss on these same citations in Mark 12:33. "How astounding [is it] that the one person Jesus explicitly loves [in

Mark's gospel] is this earnest young man – who will turn out to be [we assume] a failed disciple."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus diagnoses the problem; he realizes what is missing in this man's life. "You lack one thing," Jesus knows that the human heart has multiple needs, and that the Gospel is not a one size fits all model. Just as Paul writes that we all have distinct gifts, we also all have distinct needs. And Jesus is seeing into and through this man's question to the very heart of his deepest need and longing.<sup>4</sup>

To address this man's feeling of lack of something missing, to cure his soul-sickness, Jesus paradoxically first increases his lack by telling him, "*Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor.*" "The man felt that something was missing and Jesus' first move is to make that missing sense tangible. It's one thing to feel a gap in one's heart and one's soul; it's something else to experience a gap in the pocketbook and bank account."<sup>5</sup> Jesus seeks to make material in the man's life what is invisible to him right now. Because he knows that he cannot see his own wealth in the

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 2-3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 3.

ways that others can. What he needs is not more stuff, but community and relationality. And Jesus knows he will struggle to have that unless and until he needs to be dependent on others; he's functioning far too independently right now. So Jesus wants this man to do something that will make it impossible for him NOT to focus on life in the here and now. He wants him not just to give his stuff away, but first to sell it so he can see what it is worth dollar wise, then he wants him to give that money to the poor. This way the man can really understand the wealth he has and the inequities present in the world.

Jesus has already hinted at the fact that he knows wealth is this man's issue because he lists the commandments changing "do not covet" to "do not defraud" and then switches around the order, ending with "honor your father and mother." Coveting is an attitude; defrauding is an action.<sup>6</sup> As Levine notes in her commentary, Jesus most likely knew that the man, being young as we learn from Matthew and Luke's versions, had probably inherited his wealth from his parents, and that the man may

not have known where his parents' wealth had come from. Perhaps it had been obtained lawfully, but not righteously. Not all laws are just.

A modern day parallel might be the wealth acquired from the labor of enslaved African-Americans in the cotton fields on land stolen from indigenous communities. This wealth passes through Euro-American families for generations. Wealth may come lawfully, but it's not always righteous or just.

Additionally, Levine writes, "whether this [man] has fully honored his mother and father is an open question. He may think he has. [But in Jewish teaching] piling up wealth is not the best way of honoring one's parents. After all, parents are to teach one's children to give to the poor (Deuteronomy 6:7, i.e., love your neighbor) – so to honor his parents, the [man] should be known for his good works, especially care for the poor, and not for his wealth."<sup>7</sup>

In other words, despite this guy's best intentions and working really hard to do everything right, Jesus sees into this man's heart, and loves his

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 17, 19-20.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 21-22.

desire to do good, and he realizes that this man is viewing the commandments almost like a check-list of “one and done to-dos,” rather than as a complete re-orientation to life. Perhaps the man is following the commandments on the surface, but there are deeper meanings to be found that remain unknown to him as of yet. Faithfulness to the commandments is a lifestyle, not a list. And it is relational, not individual—what we have affects those around us and the choices that we make do too.

That’s why Jesus says, after having divested of all your earthly goods, “*Come, follow me.*”<sup>8</sup> Jesus offers this man the same invitation he offered the original twelve disciples, to leave ‘father and mother,’ take nothing with you, just come and follow me. And the man cannot do it.

He walks away grieving, depressed, or even appalled (the Greek *stygnatzo* bears all these connotations).<sup>9</sup> The man is unable to make the change that Jesus is asking him to make. Why? We don’t know fully, but it has something to do with his many possessions. Maybe the

task just felt too daunting because of the sheer amount of what he owned. Maybe he just liked his stuff. Or maybe it was just the shock of the response; it wasn’t what he was expecting, so he just couldn’t process it or do it right away; he needed time.

As Jesus processes this exchange with his disciples about the difficulty those with wealth will have entering the kingdom, he acknowledges how big a stumbling block wealth is. The image of a thick rope (think the size of rope that ties a boat to a dock) trying to go through the eye of a needle (think a sewing needle) is impossible. Camels were used to haul goods, so they were literally weighed down with possessions usually. If a camel can be burdened with riches, so can we!<sup>10</sup> So this phrase of it being easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich person to enter the kingdom of God is not random. It is intentional. And yet the impossible, is possible with God, Jesus says. There IS hope.

Money is what holds *this* man back from a full commitment to Jesus. “Greed is a disease, and

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 27.

no amount of gain can satisfy it.”<sup>11</sup> For others of us, the stumbling block is different. The takeaway for us today in this passage is not so much about wealth and money itself, as it is the Call to Change and the discomfort change causes and the courage it takes to make change.

Even as Jesus is calling this man to a radical, life-changing action, he’s doing so with *love*. Jesus is not chastising the man, he is looking lovingly at him. He’s not shaming or blaming him. He’s inviting him. Jesus wants this man to grow. Jesus is rooting for him. Jesus is rooting for us. That is why Jesus offers the man the invitation to become his disciple. If he did not see potential in him, he would have sent him on his way.

And most amazing of all, Jesus’ love for the man is not determined by the man’s actions. He loves this man *before* he makes the choice about whether he is going to make significant change in his life. “Failure to give wholeheartedly does not make one less worthy of love.”<sup>12</sup> Failure to change does not make

one less worthy of love. God’s love for you and me is unchanging.

And, even still, Jesus will keep inviting us to change when he knows it will lead to deeper and more abundant life, not just for us, but for the world. Often we want a check list of “to-dos” but the life of faith is a whole lifestyle, a new orientation and mind set.

Repentance is a word we use in Lent a lot. As John Schwiebert writes, “Unfortunately, in American Christianity, repentance has come to mean (a) a feeling such as regret, remorse, contrition, or shame, or (b) an act of piety in response to such feelings, such as penance, reparation or atonement. But none of these words does justice to the New Testament meaning of the word *metanoia*. The Greek word is formed by combining the word *meta* meaning “beyond” and the word *noia* meaning “mind.” The combination literally means “beyond mind.” It expresses the idea of gaining a new mind-set, a new way of thinking and acting, a new orientation to life. To repent really means to start

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 23.

thinking and acting in a radically different way.”<sup>13</sup>

“In the Gospel of Mark, as Jesus begins his ministry, we hear him say: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom (*commonwealth*) of God has come near, repent (*metanoieite*), and believe in [this] good news” (Mark 1:15). The connection between the coming near of the [kin-dom] commonwealth of God and this call to people to change their ways of thinking and acting is really a call to shift their loyalty from the current social and political establishment (in Jesus time, the Roman Empire and its Judean allies) to the new political and social reality that God is bringing into being.”<sup>14</sup>

“It is important to note that the twin imperatives “repent” and “believe in the good news” are not two different activities, but two ways of expressing the same pursuit. In this instance *to believe* in good news does not [necessarily] mean to hold a strong mental or even visceral conviction that the news is true and that it is good, but rather *to act in the certainty* that the new situation proclaimed by Jesus. [The kin-dom of God]

mandates a radical difference in behavior.”<sup>15</sup>

This is hopeful. Schwiebert’s reminder to us that *metanoia* is not about belief as much as about action is important. Often how we *feel* about a situation, about a change in our lives, can dictate our choices and actions, or keep us from changing altogether. Perhaps we get immobilized by our feelings. It takes courage—heart strength—to feel what we feel and yet still act in ways that may feel contrary to our feelings. If I only relied on how I felt about life, I would barely make it, as I feel things quite deeply. But there is something reassuring that I can *act* alongside my feelings, not dismissing them, but not letting them be the only factor.

When faced with daunting changes in our lives, sometimes like the man in the story, we do walk away. We turn and flee and seek solace in what we know already, rather than take a risk into the unknown. Change affects us in different ways at different times. As does the lack of change, when difficult circumstances seem ongoing

<sup>13</sup> John Schwiebert, “10 Practices For Emergent Churches,” *The Peace House* (Accessed on March 17, 2024 at <https://www.thepeacehouse.org/about-metanoia>).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



and suffering never seems to end.

Given Cory's death this week, I have been thinking a lot about those changes in our life that feel overwhelming and insurmountable. When we don't have any energy left in us to change or to seek help or make a different choice. In those cases, ones we love make a choice to walk away from life altogether.

Let me be clear that no one can ever walk away from God or God's love, God's love is with us before, during, and after life. God is carrying us across the threshold from this life to the next—no matter when or how we die. Yet, even in the embrace of God's love, when someone is so depressed and detached and despondent that they cannot feel that love, they tragically walk away from life and from those who love them. They cannot see what others see. Their pain blinds us. All they see is the relief that death will bring, not the pain or consequences for those they love. The twisted irony of suicide is that it actually does not end pain. It ends a life. But the pain doesn't end, it expands. It radiates to the people the person who died loved the most. And to know

someone who has made this choice, is to experience deep and devastating loss, as we have this week.

This is not to blame Cory or anyone else who has died by suicide. Not at all. Depression is a disease, and it is powerful. And depression works hard to win. It lies to us, and even the best of us, even the most well-intentioned ones of us can succumb to its voice and deception. Depression tells us that we are not worthy and life is not worth living. Depression tells us that our suffering will never end unless *we* end it.

But depression, while a true and real experience, is not Truth itself. Depression, while a very real experience, is not Truth. The Truth of our lives is that we are beloved and Jesus looks at us with a loving gaze and an invitation to come and follow him, to learn from him. To change our lives – even in ways that feel impossible to us – to gain a greater sense of life and community and oneness with those around us and the world. It is not a coincidence in the Greatest Commandment that love of God is tied to love of neighbor and love of neighbor is tied to love of self. When all three are present in a symbiotic

relationship. We cannot love alone; we cannot do life alone. Sometimes all we can do is simply receive the love of God and that is more than enough. Because it's not easy in a world that has taught us that love has to be earned or achieved. Even Jesus struggled to feel God's love at times—in the Garden of Gethsemane asking God if there was any other way rather than suffering and dying on the cross as he called out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

Whatever you are feeling now is not forever. If you feel like there is no hope, no way out, if you feel like you cannot change or somehow need to change to be worthy or accepted, please hear that God loves you, I love you, this community loves you. Reach out and tell someone what you are feeling. You do not have to suffer alone. Suffering is not the whole of your story, even though it may feel that way right now. There is more. Jesus is gazing lovingly at you; and that gaze will never let you go.

Project Semicolon is a global non-profit movement dedicated to presenting hope and love for

those who are struggling with mental illness, suicide, addiction and self-injury. The semicolon, a punctuation mark that represents a pause rather than an ending, encapsulates their ethos. They want to encourage everyone that their life story continues even through moments of struggle, proclaiming that no matter how bad it gets, *Your story isn't over yet.* A semicolon is used when an author could've ended a sentence but chose not to. *You are the author, and the sentence is your life.*<sup>16</sup>

Choose the semicolon.

This brings us back to our story today in Mark's gospel. Amy-Jill Levine, whose scholarship I have leaned on heavily in this sermon, through her biblical knowledge and ability to connect through-lines in the text, offers us a remarkable word of hope about this man's story.

If we just read what we read today, we might think that this man's story ended with him walking away and being sad about all the possessions he had and not wanting to give them away. But Levine suggests that

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<sup>16</sup> Information accessed from Project Semicolon on March 17, 2024 at

<https://www.projectsemicolon.com/about-project-semicolon-organization/>.

Mark 10 might just be a semicolon in this man's life. His story is not over. What seems impossible to him in the moment, becomes possible after some time has passed and he thinks more deeply about it. He has a *metanoia* moment somewhere along the way; the words Jesus says and the loving gaze Jesus gives him plant a seed, that later develops roots and eventually blooms.

She writes, "at the end of this section in Mark's Gospel, we lose sight of this would-be disciple. But I wonder...later we will meet an unnamed disciple with Jesus in Gethsemane. After Mark reports that "*all...deserted him and fled*" (14:50), we learn that "*a certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They [the soldiers] caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked,*" (14:51-52). There are multiple speculations on who this man is and why he is there. I like to think he is [our friend from the text today, our earnest and well-intentioned questioner, who upon further reflection after his initial grief and shock], sold all he had, gave to the poor, and in this last attempt to be with Jesus, *divests*

of everything to follow him."<sup>17</sup> He chooses community and life.

It is an act of love that required courage—a change of heart. And, it took a LONG time. It wasn't immediate.

Take heart, my friends. Life is full of change, and many changes are hard and require a lot from us. For we mortals, many things seem impossible. Please remember today, that for God, and *with* God, all things are possible. All means all. No exceptions. *Your* life, *your* story, *your* changes, *your* struggles included.

All things are not easy. Yet with God, all things are possible. You may not see it now, but your story isn't over. God sees possibility on the horizon for you. Trust this truth, and even if you cannot believe it, try living out its truth with your actions and choices, step by step, day by day. And if you cannot take a step, let us know, and we'll help carry you. We are with you on the journey.

Amen.

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<sup>17</sup> Levine, 29-30.