

Mom Always Liked Me Best

Mark 10:35-45

Whitefish UMC

Laity Sunday, October 18, 2009

† Wendell Berry, poet, novelist, essayist—who lives and farms on his family farm in Kentucky, tells this wonderful story:

My family and I had a good friend I will call Lily. Lily was industrious and generous, a good neighbor. She was especially well-loved by her neighbors' children and grandchildren, though she had no children of her own.

She lived a long time, surviving her husband by many years. At last, permanently ill and debilitated, she had to leave the small house that she and her husband had bought in their latter years and go to the nursing home. My brother, who was her lawyer, never until then much needed, arranged for the sale of her house and all her worldly goods.

I went to visit her a day or two after the sale. She was bedfast, sick, and in some pain, but perfectly clear in her mind. We talked of the past and of several of our old neighbors, long gone. And then, speaking of the sale of her possessions, she said, "I'm finished now. Everything is done.

She said this so cheerfully that I asked her, "Lily, is it a load off your mind?"

She said, “Well, Wendell, it hurt me. I laid here the night when I knew it was all gone, and I could see it all, all the things I’d cared about for so long. But yes, it is a load off my mind.

- † Berry concludes, “I was so moved and impressed by what she said that I wrote it down. She had lived her life and met her hardships bravely and cheerfully, and now she faced her death fully aware and responsible and with what seemed to me a completed grace. I didn’t then and I don’t now see how she could have been more admirable.”
- † Not so, it seems, with James and John, the sons of Zebedee, two of the original twelve disciples of Jesus. Isn’t it comforting to know that even those who walked the same roads as Jesus, spent time with him on the hillsides and in the boats, still didn’t get it right?
- † Not content to be first-hand participants in Jesus’ miracles of healing, forgiveness, and feeding, they jostled for more. Remember that they had gone with Jesus up the mountain of transfiguration, had seen his glory, and still weren’t satisfied.
- † Instead they boldly ask, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” Now if I had been Jesus, I think I would have said something like, “Who in heaven’s name do you think you are? Do you think you are entitled to more than all I have already given you?”
- † Instead, he gently tells them of what he will face soon—crucifixion and death—before the glory part. He asks them if they can accept that part of being with him, too. And they so easily reply, “Oh yes, we are able!”
- † “Not so fast,” we want to say—knowing the end of the story. Then, warning them of falling prey to the temptations of the surrounding culture, Jesus reminds them of what it means to be truly great:

- † “Seek not to lord it over everyone else, but instead serve others—give your life away.” Easier said than done, right?
- † For everything about our culture says just the opposite. A *Chicago Tribune* feature article a couple of years ago titled “Too Much Stuff” tells the story of the burgeoning self-storage industry. The article describes a fellow, 75 years old, who visits his 12 by 48 foot storage unit every morning.
- † This fellow says a little prayer, sits back in a recliner and takes comfort in his stuff—four desks, tools, fishing gear, pails of roofing nails, broken radios, rusty radiators, and a Heineken beer sign.
- † The *Tribune* couldn’t help editorializing: “We may not longer be the top dogs in the production of steel, cars, televisions, and other manufactured goods, and we may be losing our edge in science and technology. But the explosion in the number of self-storage facilities clearly suggests a resurgent America, indeed a nation of stuff.”
- † Adam Hamilton, author of our stewardship focus book, [Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity](#), says: “Perhaps you have heard of restless leg syndrome, (RLS), a condition in which one has twitches and contractions in the legs.
- † Restless Heart Syndrome (RHS) works in a similar way, but in the heart—or soul. Its primary symptom is discontent. We find that we are never satisfied with anything. The moment we acquire something, we scarcely take time to enjoy it before we want something else.
- † We are perennially discontent. This is the nature of RHS, and it is a syndrome that, if left unchecked, can destroy us.”
- † But, Hamilton goes on to say, “...there is a certain discontent that God intended us to have. God actually wired our hearts so that they would

be discontent with certain things, causing us to seek the only One who can fully satisfy us. God wants us to be content with certain things and discontent with others.

- † The problem is that we tend to get them confused. In other words, it is a positive motivator to be discontent with our moral character, our spiritual life, our pursuit of holiness, our desire for justice, and our ability to love. These are areas in which we should continue to grow and improve, for we are meant to become more the people God created us to be.
- † But instead we become discontent with our stuff, our spouse, our job, even our church. Of course these aspects of our life could be better, but they can also be worse. “Remember that it could be worse.” That’s John Ortberg and Adam Hamilton’s first key to cultivating contentment.
- † I don’t know about you, but I’m not crazy about “settling” in that way. But their second and third keys to contentment make more sense: when you are tempted to buy something you don’t really need, ask yourself, “How long will this make me happy?”
- † And “develop a grateful heart.” Now we’re talking. A grateful heart recognizes that all of life is a gift. Contentment comes when we spend more time giving thanks for what we have than thinking about what’s missing or wrong in our lives.
- † Not feeling particularly grateful? Sometimes the feelings of gratitude come after we think or speak about them—same goes with love. We think the feelings should come first, but it works the other way around. So when we begin to be grateful and express our thanks to

God, over time we find our hearts have changed and we are grateful for what we have. Then contentment comes.

- † Finally, ask yourself, “Where does my soul find true satisfaction?” The world answers this question by saying we find satisfaction in ease and comfort and money. But the Bible answers the question very differently. From beginning to end, it tells us that we find our satisfaction in God.
- † Saint Augustine, writing 1,600 years ago, says it best: “Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.” Wendell Berry, writing 1,600 years later, says, “This insatiable desire for more [things, including life expectancy] is the result of the overwhelming sense of incompleteness—which itself is the “wheel of death.”
- † We desire more, which makes us feel incomplete, unsatisfied, which makes us want more. And yet when we refocus our desires to God, we, paradoxically to be sure, are filled up as we give ourselves away.
- † My friend, Bill Jensen, was approved for ordination this week. In his previous life, Bill was chief counsel of Blue Cross/Blue Shield. He had money, prestige, and plenty of stuff when he retired nine years ago. He is now 68 years old. Without going into details, through no fault of his or his family’s own, he has lost most of the things that previously gave him status and worth.
- † He preached a sermon this week with the same title as mine—that’s where this title comes from. It was one of the best sermons I’ve ever heard preached, and although its focus was slightly different from ours today, one of his illustrations helps us, too.

- † Remember that James and John, in today's scripture reading, are competing for greatness, for success, for glory. They don't get what really brings those things any more than we usually do. To help us, here's a little story that my friend Bill told:
- † "I was my mother's favorite. I have known that since I was around 8 or 9 years old. It was clear to me that she favored me in nearly everything. Problem is, my three brothers don't see it that way. For some strange reason each of them believes that he was Mom's favorite. We can't all be someone's favorite child, can we?"
- † **Well yeah!** as the kids say. That's part of what Jesus is telling us. We are Jesus' brothers and sisters and God loves us each unconditionally. For Jesus, when the disciples are competing for importance or greatness, the argument simply doesn't compute.
- † Who is the greatest of Jesus' disciples—was it Peter or was it Nathanael, James or John? Who is the greatest of God's children—is it Mother Teresa or is it you? Well God's answer to this is YES. It is unconditional. An unconditional Yes. Who is the most important person in this church—is it the pastor or is it you? YES. Who does God love the most? Is it me, my mother's favorite, or is it you? YES. And who does God need to carry out God's commission to humankind. To spread the news that God loves us so much that God sent God's Son to bring us to Him. Is it me or is it you? YES.
- † You get the point, I hope. Today is Laity Sunday, a day when we celebrate the *laos*, the people who God loves and who God calls to love others—with their service and their lives.
- † The Worship Team and Finance Committee have asked some of you, the people, and remember God loves each and all of you the best, to

share how joy and contentment are found in the kind of service that Jesus talks about in today's scripture.

† (Abby, Michael, Lynn speak).

† How good it is to hear the richness of these varied lives—of your lives, too. Let's close with this quote from Miroslav Volf, who has had his share of suffering as well as glory:

A rich self has a distinct attitude toward the past, the present, and the future. It surveys the past with gratitude for what it has received, not with annoyance about what it hasn't achieved or about how little it has been given. A rich self lives in the present with contentment. It still strives, but it strives out of satisfied fullness, not out of the emptiness of craving. A rich self looks toward the future with trust. It gives rather than holding back in fear of coming out too short, because it believes God's promise that God will take care of it. . . . A rich self gives, because its life is "hidden with Christ" in the infinite, unassailable, and utterly generous God, the Lord of the present, the past, and the future.

† May your richness grow in your giving of yourself. For the love of God. Amen.

Sources:

Rev. Bill Jensen, "Mom Always Liked Me Best," preached to Yellowstone Conference Board of Ordained Ministry, October 13, 2009.

Adam Hamilton, Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity. 2008

John Buchanan, "To Save Your One and Only Life," <http://fourthchurch.org>