

The Shell Game Where Everyone Can Win
(Mark 10:17-34)

Dear Eve, Roses are red, violets are blue, I will eat the apple if you tell me to. Love Adam.

I found this and some other Biblical character valentines created by the Rev Joanna Hadderer on line. I visit her website often for sermon research and liturgy ideas. I hadn't imagined that I would run across biblical Valentines or the Valentine themed Ash Wednesday sayings like "She walks in beauty like the night, of cloudy gloom and darkest skies, behold the ash and oil unite, to form a cross between her eyes." But there they were. Clever and also a solid illustration of what a Lenten journey with Jesus is about. About integrating. It's not Ash Wednesday or Valentine's Day. It's not church or worldly. Its not joy or sacrifice. It's about those things in balance and integrated in our lives. It's about having the ways of God take root in our daily life and allowing our everyday to be transformed/disrupted/rearranged by God's love. Discipleship is a 24/7 experience not a fragment of our week or day.

It is this integrating kind of thing Jesus addresses in our sacred story this morning. A man approaches him wanting to know how he gets in on eternal life. The man seems to sense that there is something beyond and more profound then his current day to day. He approaches the Rabbi to find out how to access that more. Jesus responds reminding him of the commandments, the ways of living that build community and honor others. The man's got this. He has been following those commandments for his whole life and he reports that to Jesus.. He's in! The man can exhale with hope.

Jesus isn't through though. Jesus looks at him with love and goes on to tell him to sell everything he owns and give it to the poor. Our story goes on to say he was shocked and went away grieving for he had many possessions.

Why he was grieving? Was he grieving because he wasn't ready to give up his stuff and realized he was going to choose his material possession over a deeper connection to the holy? Or was he grieving because, as wonderful as it was going to be to be more deeply connected to Jesus, he had great memories of the times he had spent in his fancy camel saddle and it hurt his heart to let it go? We are only told he went away grieving and not what choices he made.

Jesus goes on to teach more about possessions and how they get in the way of our connecting to God. He says it is easier for Elon Musk to fit into the night deposit slot of CitiBank than for a rich person to enter the kingdom. He continues teaching about kingdom ways which are upside down from cultural norms. He teaches with love. He invites people into a way of living that is in sync with, and rooted in, sacred love. Integrated. Human day to day infused and shaped by God's love and values.

It's not one or the other. Jesus invites us to join these together and he asks us to look into our lives and notice what is getting in the way of that happening. For some of us it is our possessions. It's us trusting/relying on money over and above trust/reliance on God. Money itself is not a problem, but how we use it and how we attach to it can be. Money can be used for healing and restoring. It can provide food for the hungry and shelter for the migrant. It can also be used to build barriers to hide behind and bombs to destroy. It can become our false god. It can be the tool to be fully alive. It's nuanced and not either or.

Money is one of the things that can get in the way of our connection to God. There are plenty others - fear, substances, food, anger, addictions - plenty of things that can impede our connection to God yet some of them could also bolster our connection.

We are beginning our Lenten journey. We are walking with Jesus toward the brutality and oppression of Jerusalem. We are entering into the place where the empire flexes its muscle to execute who gets in their way. We walk toward betrayal, denial and injustice. Brutal crucifixion to silence the story and love of a different kind of world. We walk into all that. There is no way around it and it is not the end of the story. There are those 3 days while Jesus is in the tomb. His followers have had their dreams snuffed out and all they had worked for seems for naught. But the story is not over. While the empire gloats and the disciples tremble resurrecting love transforms devastation into a future. It's not what was. It's something new. It's of God and no earthly horrors or behaviors can stop it.

God was present then. God is present now. Resurrecting love continues. In Lent we are attentive to what gets in the way of our recognizing, receiving, relying on what God is enabling. We are attentive so we can take action to get the barriers out of the way that we might fully receive and participate in new heaven and earth which God is enabling.

This morning those present in the physical church received a cloth pocket with a portion of a shell in it. The shell can represent the things that get in the way of our connecting to God or it also might represent what helps you connect more to God. Or it can be both. This is given to you as a tangible reminder that there are things which turn us from God or interrupt our discipleship. And it is given to you as a tangible reminder that we can relocate/remove things which get in the way. We can wrap something around a jagged edge to keep it from cutting or hurting. We can break a piece off it is too big as is but some of it is of value. We can toss the whole thing out and replace it with something that makes it easier for us to join in Jesus' way.

This is how my shell has been working on and in me. I have a sermon writing chair (yes, I am a person of ritual). The chair is also a favorite scratching post for my cat. It looks horrible. I decided I would look for a used replacement chair. I set price and geographical distance limits. I looked, compulsively, on Facebook market place. Too many times. Too many minutes scrolling the same silly chairs. I found one I liked and it was both more expensive and further away than I had intended. So I scrolled more times. And I went back and looked at the chair. And I scrolled and and and. I finally made an offer, less than asking but more than I had planned. Picking up the chair is a ridiculous logistical conundrum. I don't have it yet and I still do some scrolling just in case. While this process goes on week after week I seem to get more hooked on the need to have a replacement chair.

In this midst of this I got a message from Geral, our Fuller Center Haitian friend, with a reminder that tuition was due. Six years ago on a trip to Haiti there was a boy who was hanging around the build site during the day. He was hanging around because he didn't go to school. He couldn't speak. Our team was concerned for him and when we learned there was a teacher that could help him, though he was deaf, they were all in to pay his tuition. Right away money was given and we got him in school. Then we all returned home and life took over. Our young friend Mater is still in school which is great news for him. However, each time I am asked for money to cover his schooling I internally fuss that the people that wanted to get him in school are no longer contributing to make that happen. I fussed when I read Geral's message asking for the

next payment. It's just 2 of us now who get to help him. While I was fussing in my head about that expense I recognized that I was not struggling with getting myself a chair that I didn't really need. There is a shell blocking my generosity.

Looking at him with love, Jesus told the man to sell what he owned. What he owned blocked him from fullness of life. What he owned operated in his life like this shell. I could give it to someone and not have any responsibility for paying attention to it any longer. I could clasp onto it tightly, making sure not to lose it, having it imprint and indent into my palm, reminding me I have a shell and hurting me at the same time. I could hold it loosely able to share it or hold on tightly.

Dear God, Roses are red, violets are blue, help us let go of what blocks us from you.
Love, Us.

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