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Mark 10:17-31

“Don’t Call Me Good”

Brene Brown is a research professor at the University of Houston graduate College of Social Work. She has done a lot of research on perfectionism. In her view, perfectionism is not the same thing as striving to be your best, nor is it about healthy achievement and growth.

She refers to it as a shield. Brown says, “It’s a way of thinking that says this. If I look perfect, work perfect, and live perfect I can avoid or minimize criticism, blame, and ridicule.” In other words, “Perfectionism is a 20-ton shield we carry around hoping that it will keep us from getting hurt.”

I know that not everyone is a perfectionist, but I do think a lot of us struggle with perfectionism to some degree. I’ve tended to think of perfectionism as a positive thing, propelling people to achieve great things. Apparently, there’s a downside. To quote Brene Brown, she says, “When perfectionism is driving, shame is always riding shotgun, and fear is the annoying backseat driver.”

I think perfectionism, most often, plays itself out in subtle ways. Over the years, I’ve noticed, in the church and in other places, we might hesitate to get involved in an initiative unless we’re pretty sure it’s going to be successful. I definitely include myself in this. We avoid attempts at doing something new and different for fear of looking foolish. We play it safe, rather than risk criticism.

Theologian Walter Wink described being “shocked to his pious roots” when his professor of New Testament said, “Our dreams of perfection are our greatest sin.” Wink wrote, “The very attempt to appear good grounds our lives in a lie (we know we are not as good as we pretend to be.) Wink writes, “Worse, it makes us cautious, incapable of creativity, risk, and failure.”

There’s an element of our Scripture reading today that always troubled me until I looked at it in light of these perfectionist tendencies. A rich young man went to Jesus, knelt before him, and asked, “Good teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life?” To which Jesus replied, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.”

The Bible witnesses to the idea that Jesus was without sin. In the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, it says the requirement for a sacrificial animal was that it be whole, without defects of any kind. It follows that if we think of Jesus dying on the cross as a sacrifice for our sin, he must be without defect, or without sin, in order to be such a sacrifice. Most Christians think of Jesus this way. He can do no wrong. He, literally, walks on water.

But did Jesus think of himself that way? In the Gospels, he would often deflect praise and titles of honor. When someone would heap praise him after being healed, he would throw it back on them saying, "Your faith has made you well."

Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" He replied, "You say that I am." Jesus rarely if ever referred to himself as the Son of God. Almost always, he referred to himself as the Son of Man. To me, that's an indication he came to show us what it means to be, not divine, but human.

He does it again in today's reading. The young man referred to Jesus as "good teacher." I would've been flattered. I would've just assumed that young man was a good judge of character. Jesus replied, "Why do you call me good?" Don't call me good. I don't care about being held in high esteem or appearing better than someone else. The spiritual life is not about avoiding failure and ridicule. "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone."

I think the young man saw something in Jesus that he wanted for himself. He saw that Jesus was good and he wanted to be good, but not just good, good enough to inherit eternal life. So, Jesus spoke to him about being good. He said, "You know the commandments." He names things that basically align with the 10 Commandments that, I'm sure, we all have memorized. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. Honor your father and mother.

The man said, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." I think that was a way of saying, "I've been good. I've kept the law. I have followed the rules." To which Jesus replied, "Ok then, 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."

Now, this is the part of the text where we tend to focus our attention. In fact, it was the source of some distress in our Bible study this week. I will probably be accused of

being soft on rich people, but in my humble opinion this is not an instruction that all of us are to take literally. The Gospels include instances in which, in my opinion, Jesus used extreme examples in order to make a point.

For example, in Matthew 18:8, he said, "If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away." He went on to say, "And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the hell of fire." I don't believe Jesus literally intended for people to hack off their hands and feet or to pluck out their eyeballs.

I don't believe the lesson from this story is that we should all sell everything we own and give the money to the poor, although that could be a legitimate response to God's call on one's life. I believe God loves the rich and the poor alike. At the same time, it seems to be that if something is going to get in the way of our relationship with God, it tends to be money.

If our love of money overshadows our love of God and neighbor, that's a spiritual problem. If we think the purpose of life is to accumulate as much as possible and hoard it to ourselves, Jesus would have us think again. In fact, I like the words of the preacher John Wesley who, back in the 1700's said, "Earn all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can."

I want to turn your attention to what Jesus was asking of the young man. Sell everything you own. Give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, and follow me. What would it mean for that young man to give everything up and follow Jesus?

It would mean that he wouldn't be in control. It would mean embracing an uncertain future. If he failed at something, he wouldn't be able to fall back on his wealth. He wouldn't be able to trust in his money for his well-being. He would be forced to trust Jesus.

In other words, Jesus was inviting him to undergo in adventure of faith. Come, and follow me! There will be ups and downs. You will try and fail. You will make mistakes, but that's what the spiritual journey is all about.

The rich young man was shocked and "went away grieving, for he had many possessions." But we don't have to be like him. We don't have to allow our possessions or the pressure to appear successful and put together prevent us from following Jesus and living in adventure of faith.

Yesterday, in the middle of the Chili Fest, I was talking with Sue Wierzba. With a crowd of people around us, some church members, some others from the community, some playing games, some sitting at tables eating, she said, “Addie and I had no idea if this would be a success. We had no idea if anyone was going to show up.” We didn’t say it in these words, but we agreed that, as a church, we can’t allow perfectionism to prevent us from taking chances.

When I lived near New York City, I would go to a comedy club called Caroline’s for open mic sessions. It would happen in the late afternoon. There was always a tiny crowd. There would be a dozen or so mostly amateurs getting up on the stage and trying to be funny for a few minutes. Some of them were quite good. In fact, Noah Friedlander showed up one day. He was an actor and writer on the show 30 Rock.

Some of them were terrible, but I absolutely loved it. These were people who were willing to get up in front of others and give it a shot. Any successful comedian knows you can’t get good without failing. Every comedian bombs. It’s part of the process. It’s a lot like preaching in that respect. If you’re going to preach, you have to embrace mediocrity.

I believe the same is true in the spiritual life. Jesus didn’t exactly choose disciples who had it all together. He wasn’t looking for perfect. He was looking for people who were willing to take an adventure of faith, to try and to fail, to make mistakes, to doubt, and to have moments of actually getting it right. To quote Brene Brown, “You can’t ever do anything brave if you’re wearing the straitjacket of what other people think.”

Are we required to sell everything we own and give the money to the poor? I don’t know. That’s between you and God. My goal is to do whatever I have to do to respond when Jesus says, “Come, and follow me.”