

Sermon Prepared by The Rev. Matt Rhodes for
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Forest, Virginia
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, October 10, 2021

(Mark 10:17-31)

Today's passage from Mark's Gospel caused me to ponder the idea of first steps and about the number of first steps – literal and figurative – we take in our lives.

There are the first steps many children take as they make the dramatic leap from crawling to walking. There is the first step that young men and women take into first grade and then middle school before finally – and for me as a parent, most frighteningly of all – they assume the mantle of high school senior. There are many other first steps as well: the first day of college and the first day of work; walking into a new career or a new life as a married couple; going into a church for the first time.

For all of the joyful first steps in life, however, there are many others marked by tears and sorrow. The first step a child takes after a parent has died or a parent takes after the relationship with their child has disintegrated. The first moments experienced at the finality of severing a business partnership or ending a marriage. The first step after someone has been told their company must downsize and they're being laid off. The first step taken after the doctor gives the diagnosis we didn't want to hear.

Yes, first steps – the good and the bad – are often the hardest, and sometimes they are even the most painful. But as impossible as we think that first step may be ... as hard as we think it may be to enter something new or find the strength to carry on when something is ending ... remember this: God is in the business of making the impossible *possible*.

In today's reading from Mark, we see how difficult it is for this unnamed man to take a first step into something new: discipleship. Jesus gives us a glimpse of what is possible when we take those seemingly impossible steps. This man certainly seems to think he had taken all of his steps in the right order: he lived a righteous life; he followed all of the commandments since early in his life; he thought he was ready to take that next step toward inheriting eternal life. But after hearing all of this, Jesus reveals something to him that seems to cast all of his righteousness aside and put him in what he sees as an incredibly difficult decision.

“[G]o, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”¹

¹ Mark 10:21 (NRSV).

It is important to note that Jesus is in no way showing he doubts the sincerity of this man; indeed, in verse 21 we see that “Jesus ... loved him.”² I think Jesus certainly appreciated all this young man had done to get to this point. He appreciated his faithfulness. But Jesus uses his love for this man and for his disciples as the starting off point to show them that there is more required of them – and that the true first step won’t be easy.

He wants them to understand that discipleship, that achieving the life in the kingdom that this young man was seeking, “is about transformation and character change.”³ It is about doing something completely different ... about tackling something far beyond anything they think they can comfortably do. It is about daring to look the impossible in the eye and say, “I can do this!”

At this point in time, there were competing lines of thought on the importance of material possessions. On one hand, many felt that wealth was a sign of God’s pleasure. The disciples seem to feel this way (and even display their oft-displayed confusion) as they wrestle with this – although again they avoid asking Jesus about it directly and instead talk among themselves. They are just there ... perplexed. On the other hand, however, we see “in many of the psalms and in the teaching of Jesus [an identification of] the poor with the pious.”⁴

But this passage is not about any sort of judgment being issued. I don’t think we’re being asked to give everything all at one time. He says to sell, just not all at once (thoughtful, long-term support is after all much more beneficial than a one-time fire sale of all we own!). Jesus is not trying to say that “poverty is better than riches” or “that only the poor can be saved”; what he is saying is “that riches make being a disciple difficult but the rewards of discipleship are worth more than material possessions.”⁵

We are blessed with opportunities to be disciples throughout the year, and through all we do to support this parish and our community we have just as many chances to experience first-hand the rewards of discipleship. Yes, there’s something particularly appropriate about this passage coming as we approach stewardship season – the time when we each prayerfully consider how we will support the church with our gifts of time, talent and treasure. Often, the difficult first step faced during this time is in discerning what we will offer – to the church, to one another and to those in need.

But in considering what we will do, it is important to remember that the rewards of discipleship extend far beyond what we ourselves receive after taking this step. As much as we are blessed through our stewardship and gifts, the rewards are most

² Morna D. Hooker. *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, p. 241.

³ David B. Howell, “Mark 10:17-31 – Pastoral Perspective.” *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*, p. 168.

⁴ Hooker, p. 242.

⁵ James A. Brooks. *The New American Commentary: Mark*, p. 161.

definitely extended to those who benefit from them: those supported by our outreach; those who visit this sacred place for worship, fellowship and companionship; all who turn to the Church in times of joy and sorrow, in times of celebration and mourning.

Taking any first step can be difficult and sometimes painful, and we often don't know what will result from it. That is just as true with both stewardship and discipleship. But we can be assured of this: taking a first step toward discipleship pays out twice: once in the reward we ultimately receive from God, and once in the reward others receive in feeling loved, supported, welcomed and encouraged. Always remember: no matter how impossible things may look, in God *all things are possible!*

Amen.