

Hebrews 4:12-16 Pastor Bill Uetricht 10.07.21 20 Pentecost

A couple of weeks ago, my son Micah was on C-span interviewing one of the country's best-known historians, particularly presidential historians, Rick Perlstein. On that interview, Perlstein made a point that really got my attention. He feels that we as a nation often haven't told the truth about our story. And for him, maturation, growing up, is a matter of telling and facing the truth. I had never articulated it that way, but I find the insight compelling. To grow up, to mature, is to stop running from the things we would rather not face.

Wow! I wonder if the book of Hebrews in today's second reading is calling us into a more mature discipleship of Jesus. I wonder if it is asking us to grow up when the writer speaks of the word of God being living and active, sharper than a two-edged sword. It (the word of God, not the Bible, but the communicated message of God) can pierce us, can slice us open. It has the ability, he says, "to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." Before God, he claims, none of us can hide; we all are naked and are laid bare.

But let's face. Many of us work hard at hiding, even ourselves from ourselves. Regularly at our compline service at night, I use a confession that admits: "We long to be seen and known. But we are terrified of what you will see and know." We'd rather hide.

A common dream for people involves showing up at some event with nothing on but your birthday suit. Our dreams often reflect some of our unconscious fears. Showing up some place naked is to be known in a way that we don't want to be known. To be fully known is one of our greatest fears. "We long to be seen and known, but we are terrified of what you will see and know."

Hebrews says that before God we are laid bare. We are fully known. We can't hide. Psalm 139 says: "O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You

discern my thoughts from far away. Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?”

The assumed answer is “nowhere.” On the one hand, that is such great news, but on the other, it is so unsettling. I can run, but I can’t hide. Ruthann from our Bible study on Wednesday said, “Sometimes you would just like to have a private thought!” Before God, we all are naked and are laid bare. Hiding ourselves even from ourselves is useless. We are known!

I don’t know for sure if the rich man in our gospel text was hiding from himself, others, or God. Biblical work that tries to get at the internal motivation of characters always seems to be questionable to me. How do we know what motivates people in stories? I am not sure of the rich man’s internal struggling, but this is for sure: the word of God that came to him from Jesus was living and active. It was like a two-edged sword, piercing him.

From my perspective, the rich man is a really good guy, the kind of person you’d like as a neighbor. He’s respectful, bows down at the feet of Jesus. He is a seeker, searching for life that is full and in keeping with the God known and experienced by Jesus and the people of Israel. He asks good questions: what do I need to do to get the good life, life with God now and forever? And the man seems to be quite righteous. As Jesus points to the commandments as great descriptions of what the good life looks like, the rich man says that he has kept them all. And I have a sense that we can believe that. He’s a good man.

One thing you have left to do, Jesus tells him. Get up! Sell what you own and give to the poor. Then you will receive what the good life looks like, what my way, the way of Jesus, is all about. And we are told that when he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had much wealth. The word was living and active. The word

unsettled. And maybe, I don't know for sure, the living and active word of God laid him bare, told the truth to him.

To be sure, to do as Jesus tells him is to have his whole life radically altered. The text tells says that he was a man with lots of wealth, in those days, probably meaning a lot of land. Who knows why he had a lot of land? But in New Testament days, poor people often lost their land because of high taxation and because of the power of the rich to overtake their land. This guy is likely a part of the aristocracy. Jesus is inviting him away from the aristocracy and toward the reign of God, a reign where the first are often last and the last are often first.

It's a whole new world in the world of Jesus, this text seems to be saying. It's our world turned upside down. And most of us, if we are honest, don't want to hear that kind of truth, or at least find it shocking. Twice in today's reading from Mark, when Jesus is telling his disciples how hard it is for rich people to get the good life, the disciples are astonished. They were part of a culture that taught that riches were a blessing from God and that the rich were, therefore, especially blessed. And the Empire, the Romans, reinforced that message by turning the really rich and powerful—the Emperor, in particular—into god-like figures.

If the rich don't get the goods, (cannot be saved), then who will? The disciples are asking a very legitimate question. And let's face it. We all ask the same question all the time. Or if we don't ask the question, we operate with the assumption that life is about amassing more, that more is what provides the good life.

This past week we received a fax from the Pappas Law firm that told us that our family, because of our connection to our now dead relative, Dr. Amos Uetrict, was poised to be the recipient of a settlement of eleven million dollars due to his work in selling fine gems. Now those of you who have been around for a while know that Amos

was our much-loved dog. Truthfully, we did not realize that he had gotten a doctorate, although the Uetrichts are always high achievers, nor did we ever see his fine gems, but maybe this was part of his hidden life. But we are pleased that Amos could net us eleven million dollars!!

Scams like that exist because we believe that money and more of it are what run the show and what brings the good life. This is the truth that needs to be told about our personal history and American history. The story about the rich man gets under our skin because it is a living and active word that reveals what for many of us is too often at the center of our lives. Money matters sometimes too much.

I have to wonder if Jesus is not asking the rich man to grow up, to face with honesty what has led his life and, frankly, what has become his preoccupation. Jesus seems to think that to follow him is to have a different preoccupation. In his world, it's not all about money. In his world, the rich and the powerful aren't at the center. It's a crazy new world when Jesus leads the way.

Now much of this feels like judgment, comes as threat. And in some ways, it is. The living and active word of God is piercing. Truth telling unsettles. Being laid bare is deeply troubling. But I want you to note something. Mark says this: "Jesus, looking at [the rich man], loved him." John Petty suggests that the first part of that sentence might be interpreted, "Jesus, seeing through the rich man." Jesus saw through him. But that seeing through was shaped by love.

You should know that nowhere else in Mark's gospel is Jesus said to love someone. Jesus is fond of this man; he loves him. It is his love that drives his conversation with him. It is his love that wants the rich man to grow up. It is his love that lays him bare. It is his love that invites him into a whole new life.

We have to get this. Yes, we can't hide. Yes, we are known. Yes, all the shenanigans that we are involved in to hide the truth from ourselves and from others are revealed to be just that: shenanigans. But it is love that is leading the way. It is love that wants us to grow up. It is love that wants to take us to the deeper places, the truly good life. We are known, but we are known by love. God sees through us and loves us, nonetheless. To know that, by the way, is to be free from all the ridiculous things we do to hide. What's the point?

The Book of Hebrews speaks of this love in terms of the life of Jesus. For Hebrews, Jesus is the great high priest, the one who is above all of it, but at the same time, is entrenched in it all. He is able to sympathize with us and our weaknesses, for he has been tempted in every way. The point is that in this journey of hiding and being laid bare, we are accompanied. Love journeys with us as we are tempted to run and as once again, we are found out.

Since it is true love that travels with us, we won't ever be the same. True love is not content with our immaturity. True love is not satisfied with our preoccupations with the shallow stuff. True love will change us. When true love leads the way, life won't be so much about amassing more, but about letting go. True love will help us grow up, grow up into becoming disciples of Jesus who seek the ways of the God who turns this world upside down.