

Proper 23b October 10, 2021  
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**How Love Cracks Us Open**  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

What does it mean to be loved by Jesus? I ask that question because that is what is going on in today's Gospel lesson where a man approached Jesus and asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. We heard as part of his response, Jesus looked at the man and loved him. This may seem like a small detail, in part because only the author of Mark's Gospel includes it in their version of this interaction. But maybe that doesn't mean it isn't integral to what the author of Mark might want us to see.

This interaction is often interpreted through the lens of stewardship, mainly because the fall months tend to be a time when churches and parishes remind members how important their pledges are. I certainly don't want to diminish that message because financial support is important. But I also don't want to diminish what the author of Mark was trying to tell us about Jesus through his encounter with the man in our Gospel today. When we look at this story through the lens of stewardship, we can end up judging the man for feeling sad that Jesus told him he needed to sell everything he owned and give that money to the poor. This puts the man at a comfortable distance from ourselves, even though very few of us have done what Jesus instructed the man to do.

When we remember Jesus said what he said out of love, this brings added depth to the encounter. It invites us to wonder what it means to be loved by Jesus; to be loved by God.

I'm sure I don't need to remind you love is one of those overused words in the English language, and that overuse has diluted its definition and meaning to include everything from fondness to lustfulness to control to enthusiasm. But surely there is a difference between loving a pet or a spouse or a child and loving a car or a movie or a meal or a way of life.

When I worked with Living Compass Wellness Ministry, which is a nationwide ministry in the Episcopal Church, we talked about love as being a choice and a commitment. We described love as a verb, an action, not a feeling or emotion. Love is a choice to be with a person or pet through good and bad times. Love is giving people the time and space they need to change or adapt to changes. Love is not the same thing as allowing abuse or harm or control. At the same time, love is not the freedom to do as one pleases, because love considers the needs and wants and wellbeing of another.

When we think about what it means that God is love and God loves us, and this love is embodied through Jesus, it means we need to look to Jesus to gain some insight on love. Jesus did not do whatever he wanted. Jesus was obedient to God. We might imagine that means Jesus never caused harm, but if we go back to today's Gospel, we could say Jesus caused grief because that's how the man was feeling when he left Jesus. And that might be confusing, because we often think of love as offering support, comfort, and help, not being disruptive.

The Rt. Rev. Porter Taylor, the bishop of Western North Carolina, has written about love in a way that might help us today. He wrote, "Love is what cracks open our shells." And that is what happened to the man in today's Gospel.

It seems to me the man asked a question he might have thought he already knew the answer to. So maybe he went to Jesus looking for validation instead of instruction or being broken open. When Jesus said only God is good and eternal life is living the way God prescribed when Moses gave the Ten Commandments, the man replied he had lived that way ever since he was a child. Of course, Jesus did not mention all the original ten. At first he left out the ones about loving God instead of idols and resting on the sabbath. We could assume Jesus' instructions to the man were about honoring those commandments, but I don't want to get too legalistic here. The commandments about God are about loving God by putting God first, they are about recognizing all we have and all we are comes as a gift from God, because God is good, not because we are.

There is a misinterpretation of this concept that we can sometimes see in scripture and in preaching and commentaries and some self-help books. It's the idea that if you are doing all the right things, you make God feel good and God rewards you for making God feel good by giving you wealth, prestige, and privilege. It's sometimes called the "prosperity gospel" and unfortunately it can get confused for what it looks like to be loved by God. What is even more unfortunate is that this concept can be used to con people into giving their money to a preacher or a church under the false promise that if they do they will receive ten times what they gave, which is a just another form of greed. Or, even worse, it can cause more harm when someone who suffers financial loss or ill health falsely believes those misfortunes are God's punishment for somehow displeasing God. Another negative side effect is people falsely believe they are good people if they are doing well financially and therefore don't need to participate in religious life, or care for others, and can live for themselves alone.

None of those examples are the love of God in Christ. When Jesus looked at the man and loved him, he loved him for all that he is, warts and all. Not for anything the man had done or left undone. Perhaps the man had anticipated Jesus would tell him he already had eternal life because his wealth was an

indicator of God's favor. But since that is not what God's love is, Jesus shocked the man by saying if he truly wanted to live into those commandments about loving God, he needed to let go, not just to let go of possessions and wealth, but the privilege and status that comes with them and the lie that those things were signs of God's love. Instead, he needed to learn to walk with Jesus by walking with the vulnerable, with those who understand that every day is a gift, and every good thing we have is something to be grateful for because God gives not as we deserve but because God loves us. Jesus was showing love by cracking open the shell of privilege and status so the man might see beyond the lie of privilege into the heart of God.

The reason for the man's shock and grief was Jesus had given him a new way to think about the commandments and the law and the new world Jesus brings through his resurrection. It was a challenge to the man's beliefs and perhaps to those of the disciples who further pressed Jesus after the man's departure by asking if he couldn't receive eternal life, then who?

Jesus responded by saying that through the misunderstanding of God's love, it is truly impossible for anyone. But it's not impossible for God. Through Jesus' resurrection we see just how deep and powerful God's love truly is. Jesus' resurrection is God showing how far God is willing to go to be with us and to save us from ourselves, that God will find a way not to punish us but to use our sins and even death to work God's wonders of redemption.

In her newest book titled *The Church Cracked Open*, the Rev. Can. Stephanie Spellers expands on today's Gospel by looking at the causes for grief and angst in the church today: the pandemic and how it has brought to light, or cracked open, the disparities caused by racism and privilege. She writes about how things like declining church membership and the ways people respond to the pandemic are the same cracking open of our shell that the man in today's Gospel experienced because they challenge us to consider how we view our ministries, worship, and place in our communities. Do we see ourselves as being separate and above our community because we are God's frozen chosen, or do we recognize that our choices and actions can impact the lives of others? She challenges us to see these events not as punishments for misdeeds or to blame others for our suffering, but for deeper reflection and recognition for the ways the church has failed to offer resurrection life and to repent and change and follow Jesus by setting aside our privilege to listen to and learn from those who are different. Like the man in today's Gospel, it means challenging our privilege and status and letting it go, which can feel painful, disruptive, and cause grief. But she also reminds us God loves us all the time, even when we are suffering and

grieving, and changing, and God is not afraid to walk with us through such times. Which means God is right here with us, not because we are special or better than others, but simply because God loves us.

What does it mean to be loved by Jesus? It doesn't mean big ornate buildings, a busy program schedule, pews bursting with people, large staff, or big budgets. It means from time to time our shells will be cracked open, not to punish us or harm us or cause us grief, but so that the Holy Spirit can enter more deeply into our lives, our church, our ministries. And so that we can grow closer to God and each other, by remembering we don't do any of this on our own, but only through God, through whom nothing is impossible. Or, as the late Leonard Cohen wrote, cracks are "how the light gets in."