

A Camel’s Journey

Psalm 90: 12-17

Mark 10: 17-31

Sir, we would see Jesus.

I am told that once in the pulpit of Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur there was an engraved saying facing the person who was approaching it that read: *Sir, we would see Jesus.*

It is a Bible verse from John 12: 21 and the setting is after Jesus came to Jerusalem. A group of Greeks – that is folks who were not Jews – came to the disciple Philip with this request.

A number of years ago Vicki accompanied a church group on a mission trip to Mexico. It was not a church that we were members of but she was asked to go along to help with interpretation. The primary work of the group was doing some dental clinic work and having a Bible school as well. A couple of young men were on the trip and they were very evangelistic. They wanted to go out on the street and share the Good News. They got Vicki to come along and one of them said – ask this fella coming up the street if he knew Jesus. Vicki suggested that phrasing the question another way might be better. But he insisted. So she asked – in Spanish – *do you know Jesus?* The man’s face brightened up and he said – *Sure! He lives around the corner.*

At the seminary, this verse is a reminder that in the pulpit, the preaching is to introduce people to Jesus. I didn’t go to Columbia Seminary and I have never stood in that pulpit. But I think about the request – We would see Jesus – often. Indeed, it is what anyone who has a worship leadership role is to do. My task today is to help people who do not know Jesus to learn about him. For those who know Jesus, the task is to assist in developing your relationship.

We learn about Jesus not only from the sermon. We see Jesus in the whole experience of worship. The charge to the choir and the other worship leaders, to the ushers and even those who count the offering is to respond and provide introductions and deepening relationships to Jesus. When we do this, we not only help others know Jesus, but each of us deepens our own relationship as well.

We come to church for many reasons. But at the core of them there is something that we want from Jesus or something that we need from Jesus.

The gospel story today is about a man who meets Jesus. The other gospel accounts say the man was either a “rich, young man” or a “rich ruler.” Mark just describes him as a man who wants to know about this eternal life business. This man could be any one of us – male or female or questioning. He is the representative of humanity in that moment. Our agent asks *what is this eternal life business I keep hearing about?*

Jesus says – *You know the commandments. Don’t murder, don’t commit adultery, don’t steal, don’t tell lies, don’t defraud, honor your father and mother. Keep those and all shall be well.*

But our agent who wants something else says – *I have kept all the rules. But there is still something missing.* Can we sympathize with this plight? How many times have you done the right thing only to come up short in some calculation?

Will Willimon was for many years chaplain at Duke University. He has served the United Methodist Church as a theologian and bishop. And more than a few Presbyterians have been touched by his preaching. He preached a sermon on this same text a few years ago.[[1]](#footnote-1)

He said that the story reminds him of an account told by Clarence Jordan, the founder of Koinania Farm in Americus, GA, the incubator of Habitat for Humanity. Jordan was visiting a relatively large church that was integrated racially as well as economically. This was in the South in the early 1960s. The pastor was a country type of fella. Jordan asked him “How did your church get this way?’

The preacher responded – “What way?” Jordan replied that it was unusual to see that kind of diversity in that place and time.

The preacher said, "Well, when our preacher left our small church, I went to the deacons and said, 'I'll be the preacher.' The first Sunday as preacher, I opened the book and read, 'As many of

slaves or free, males or females, because you all is one in Jesus.'

Then I closed the book and I said, 'If you are one with Jesus, you are one with all kind of folks. And if you ain't, well, you ain't.'"

Jordan asked what happened after that. "Well," the preacher said, "the deacons took me into the back room and they told me they didn't want to hear that kind of preaching no more."

Jordan asked what he did then. "I fired them deacons," the preacher roared.

"Then what happened?" asked Jordan.

"Well," said the old hillbilly preacher, "I preached that church down to four. Not long after that, it started growing. And it grew. And I found out that revival sometimes don't mean bringin' people in but gettin' people out that don't dare to love Jesus." (As told in Hauerwas and Willimon, Where Resident Aliens Live, Nashville: Abingdon, 1996, p. 103).

Willimon says that this seems to be a pretty good example of the Good News being the Bad News. He then told about a time when he led a student Bible study in a college dormitory. He was the chaplain at Duke University so interacting with college students was part of Willimon’s daily rounds for a good many years. He tells of a time when he was using this account in much the way it has been presented so far. The he asked the students: *What do you make of this story?*

On student immediately asked: *Has Jesus ever met this man before?*

Willimon replied: *Why do you ask?*

*“Because Jesus seems to have lots of faith in him. He demands something risky, radical of him. I wonder if Jesus knew this man had a gift for risky, radical response. In my experience, a professor only demands the best from students that the professor thinks are the smartest, best students. I wonder what there was about this man that made Jesus have so much faith he could really be a disciple."*

That was not what the theologian and chaplain and preacher was expecting. Then another student said:

*"I wish Jesus would ask something like this of me. My parents totally control my life just because they are paying all my bills. And I complain about them calling the shots, but I am so tied to all this stuff I don't think I could ever break free. But maybe Jesus thinks otherwise."*

Again, not what was expected. Willimon even said he was *astounded.*

He said: *What I had heard as severe, demanding BAD news, these students heard as gracious, GOOD news.*

*Jesus invites people to be his disciples: divest! Break free! Let go of your stuff! Follow me! I believe you can do it!*

We humans say that camels can’t make it through the eye of a needle. Yet Jesus says – no so fast.

We make lists with all sorts of demands. Yet Jesus offers words that can be encouragement to the disciples in his day – and in ours. All things are possible with God.

Thanks be to God.

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1. Will Willimon, The Peril (and the Promise) of Being Met by Jesus. Day 1.org October 11, 2009. <http://day1.org/1473-the_peril_and_the_promise_of_being_met_by_jesus>. Accessed October 12, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)