

Bullseye? Not Even Close!
Hebrews 4: 12 – 16 Mark 10: 17 -31
October 10, 2021
Rev. L. Bryan McClain

A wise man who predates Christ and the church once said, “To understand everything is to forgive anything.”

As we read the Hebrews text, we might not at first have a thought like that in our minds nor our hearts. Instead, we hear the writer speaking to one community of people, the church, about another community of people, the Hebrew people, about their wilderness journey. The talk was not so much about God’s faithfulness to see them to the Promised Land, as much as it was about the successes and failures along the way.

The desert was more or less the testing ground for this community of believers. The test was not to see who was worthy or not, but rather it was a testing in order to prepare them to be the people of God. Much like when a teacher tests a student, not for the purpose of passing or failing that student, but each test, each lesson, is meant to prepare the student. From the tests that come, a teacher is able to observe the weaknesses and strengths of a student and thus better able to understand what that student needs.

So too, the things we go through are not tests meant to judge whether we are worthy or not of God’s love. We already know that on our own merits, none of us are worthy. We all have fallen short of God’s glory. We are saved only by God’s grace. God’s unconditional love. That is a love that says, like that saying I quoted when I started. To understand everything is to forgive anything.

Now certainly, none of us are God. And so, to say that it would be extremely challenging to understand everything would be an understatement. But to grow in grace is never the less the wilderness journey of our souls, not just as individuals but as a community of believers to receive and accept the grace offered to us, but to also grow in that grace. To grow in grace means that we are to grow in our understanding of those around us.

Each of us are called to work for the good of one another. That good being to help one another embrace God, embrace his call to let go of our sinful past, and embrace a future filled with a mutual love for one another.

We begin to see that even more in verse 14 of Hebrews 4. “Since then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens. Jesus, the Son of God. Let us hold fast to our confession.” A confession that claims Jesus as Lord, Jesus as the one who forgives our sins. A confession that calls all of us, no matter who we are, no matter what our background may have been, no matter what color our skin is, no matter what language we grew up speaking;

when we answer the call to follow Christ, we all embark on that journey through the wilderness of faith together.

To do that together means that we must trust that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit is leading us. To follow this triune God, all of us have to learn to lay down the things that we think define us, the things we like to think make us who and what we are, the things that we think offer us security and follow Christ, just as we see in Mark's Gospel.

As Jesus was getting ready to set out on a journey, where was he going? Who knows? It doesn't say. And we don't need to know, as you will see.

A man runs up to Jesus and honors Jesus by kneeling down in front of him, asking him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Well, you might notice the first thing Jesus says to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." And there is your first clue as to where this conversation is going. Jesus goes on to tell this man what the law says to do; you know the commandments. You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud, and you shall honor your father and mother.

Well, the man seemed quite relieved as he tells Jesus that he has kept these commandments since his youth. He is breathing a sigh of relief because, as far as he is concerned, he has hit the bullseye of being a faithful follower of God.

And that is the way most people look at being a faithful follower of God, whether we are Christian, Jewish, Muslim, or any other faith, even agnostics who believe the following the law, is the most important thing.

But Jesus says to this man, "You lack just one thing; Go and sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me." But, again, where was Jesus going? Who knows? That man had no more idea where Jesus would lead him than the Hebrew people knew where Moses would lead them. And we remember learning about that journey, don't we? Forty years in the desert, many trials and tribulations, failures, and times of great learning and insights that helped forge something that many have not come to take for granted. Faith.

Faith is not just a gift that comes to us by hearing the word of God alone. It comes when the reality of our lives makes us realize that we cannot do life alone without God. Faith becomes real to us when we reach our breaking point and have no place else to turn, and we finally turn to God. And when we do, we begin to learn that God shows us what unconditional love is all about.

But to fully embrace that, we must let go of all that we think we need to hold onto that makes us who we think we are. For this man, it was his wealth. And I think for most of us, I could

stop right there, including me. Let go of what I believe will keep my family and me safe and secure, fed, clothed, housed, and so on and so on. But would Jesus really ask me to do that?

For the man who heard Jesus say you lack one thing...he went away sad because he had many possessions. He had a lot of stuff that he thought made him who he was, which made him feel secure and perhaps a bit superior, along with his hitting the bullseye on what he needed to do to inherit eternal life.

But remember I said, that is what a lot of people think. If you listened closely, that is not what Jesus said at all. What he said is: in order to be considered even the least in the Kingdom of God, you follow the laws. Remember when Jesus asked the man, "Why do you call me Good? Only God is good."

Just following the commandments of God is not the best we can do; it is, at most, the minimum we can do. It's like throwing darts at a dartboard, and instead of hitting the bullseye, all we can do is hit the most outer edge ring before you miss the board altogether.

However, to go and sacrifice something of ourselves, not out of a sense of obligation, or keeping at a bare minimum the commandments, but rather out of love and a growing understanding of the nature of God, which we see in Jesus Christ, we begin to lay down all that we think defines us.

We lay down all that we think keeps us secure in who and what we are, and we begin to love the loveless, the poor. Open our hearts to the ones who so desperately need our help; that is when we begin to truly follow God on a journey that will take us where? Who knows, but it will be an eternity following our creator, redeemer, and sustainer.

I don't know that Jesus or the Holy Spirit will ask you to literally lay down everything you have to literally go on a missionary journey. For some, they do get that call. But for most of us, if we can just begin to throw our darts a little more towards the center of that board, trying to hit the bullseye target of truly loving God. It can be enough now because, once again, we all live by grace. But then again, we are also expected to grow in that grace.

That is why Jesus tells his disciples when Peter realizes that they had left everything to follow Jesus, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters, or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age."

But what that means is not that any one of them finally hit that bullseye by leaving home and family; they just got off the edge and a little closer to it. They still need grace, and they still need to live by grace to have any chance at all. It really means that they are starting to put God in the center of their lives and trust God wherever God will lead them.

And hopefully, that explains for all of us why Jesus says that last sentence. “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

If we really want to hit the bullseye, well, good luck, you will need it, but mostly you will need to stop aiming for the minimum standards and start aiming your sights on God’s unconditional love and loyalty to all of his children who trust in him. After all, we are called to be a community of believers and followers.

May God grant us all the wisdom and understanding of these words shared today. Amen.