

*Sisters, Brothers, Equals*  
A Sermon on Mark 10:17-31 by the Rev. Philip Major  
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ October 13, 2024

Do you believe that each person is equal in the eyes of God? Equality is a very modern idea that comes to us courtesy of someone who lived two thousand years ago, Jesus of Nazareth. Following the example of our patron saint, St. Paul, you and I affirm that each person is created equal in the eyes of God, regardless of whether they are refugees or immigrants or natives, regardless of whether they are male or female, regardless of their wealth or lack of wealth. For you and me, the equality of all persons is at the heart of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

Many people, even today, seem to disagree with this idea of equality. Even today, many Christian churches refuse to ordain women and gay people as ministers. In 2024, millions of Americans make all sorts of excuses for why they will not vote for a woman to be President of the United States. We are struggling to achieve the kind of equality described by St. Paul two thousand years later.

The situation was worse in America two hundred years ago. Two hundred years ago in America, the only people who received full rights and respect were white men. Everyone else, the women, the native people and people of color were not considered to be equal to white men.

There was even less equality in the time of Jesus and in the time of the prophet Amos. Amos lived about 800 years before Jesus' time. His words are scathing: *Seek the LORD and live, or he will break out against you and your people, the house of Joseph, like fire, and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it. Ah, you wretched people that turn justice to bitterness, and bring righteousness to the ground!* Who are the people who have turned justice to bitterness? They are the rich people of Amos' time. They own enormous plantations. They do not work. They never lift a hand to care for the vineyards and the olive trees. All of the work is done by the poor peasants who were paid very low wages.

*Therefore, because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have ordered your servants to build you houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; your servants have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine.* In Amos' time there was a small number of very rich people, and a very large number of very poor people. There were not many people who might be described as middle class. There was no idea of equality, or equal rights in Amos' time. Amos declares that extreme inequality, and oppression of the poor, is offensive to God.

But the extreme inequality of Amos' time continued, even among God's covenant people. Among the Jews of Jesus time the numbers of people in the different social classes looked like a pyramid. There were an enormous number of very poor people at the bottom, like the bottom of a pyramid. There was a small middle class, made up primarily of overseers. Overseers were the people who were the managers, the ones standing out in the fields or standing in the middle of construction sites, giving orders to the poor laborers, and beating them if they disobeyed. There was an even smaller number of rich people. The rich did not work; they paid others to do the work for them.

Especially in the Gospel of Mark we notice there are enormous crowds of people following Jesus everywhere he goes. Most of these people are from that bottom social class, the poor. One of the main ideas of the Gospel, especially the Gospel of Mark, is that the rich people and the highly educated people and the people in positions of power, like the priests, should be the ones who understand Jesus' message, because they know the scriptures, but they reject him. They are afraid of Jesus and his preaching about God's kingdom. They are afraid of his message, including his message of honor and equality for all people. But for the poor people, Jesus' care for them and Jesus' message of God's kingdom are extremely attractive.

God's kingdom, or perhaps we might say God's 'kindom' or God's family, overturns the hierarchies of the world. This is the primary idea of today's Gospel passage. The rich man is unwilling

to become one of Jesus' disciples, because he is unwilling to sell his many possessions and give the money to the poor.

For the rich young man, the conflict is not just about his possessions. If the rich man gives away his wealth, he will lose more than his possessions. He will lose his status as a person at the top of the social hierarchy. He will lose the honor that is given to him. His rich friends will no longer welcome him into their homes. People will not be deferential to him. He would have to do something he has never done before; he would have to work. The young man would have to work in the fields or work on a fishing boat, just in order to have food to eat. The rich man would no longer have independence; he might actually have to rely on other people for help. If the rich man gives away his wealth to the poor, he will also be poor, because the inequalities of wealth were extreme in his time. And since it was almost impossible for a poor person to become wealthy, he would be poor for the rest of his life.

But the good news given by Christ Jesus is that when we set aside our hierarchies and systems of privilege we find true security, which is found in the family of God's people. *Jesus said, "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 for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life."*

This might sound like Jesus is asking people to leave their families in order to be part of God's family. That is not the point. Let's remember this passage comes after Jesus' challenge to the rich young man to give up his wealth in order to become one of his disciples. Let's remember that the main purpose of families and marriages was survival. Life was difficult and many poor people did not live long lives. Families were very tribal because it was a way for people to survive. Brothers and sisters were important for several reasons, but mostly because they helped you survive.

This passage is about security and community. Jesus observed that all of his followers gave up something in order to become his disciples, even if they were poor fisherman, not rich like the young man. Jesus' disciples gave up the things that brought them security in life, in order to follow Jesus. Jesus' disciples became part of a new, larger family of God's people. This brought them something none of them expected outside of their old family groups: long-lasting, supportive relationships outside their families. Becoming a disciple of Jesus brought them something they had never seen before: community built on relationships of equality.

This is good news. It delivers us from the evils of hierarchy, where those with more wealth and power are given more respect, and those with less wealth and power are given no respect. It describes the security and support we find in the community of God's people.

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We saw a powerful demonstration of this vision yesterday at St. Paul's. Yesterday morning our congregation welcomed many people who came here for the funeral service for the Rev. John Rohde. St. Paul's was full to the brim with people from many parishes, with John's family, and hundreds of John's friends. Dozens of our members played a part in preparing for the service and the reception and welcoming these grieving people as our brothers and sisters. In the words of our Gospel passage, St. Paul's became like their home for a few hours, a place of comfort and assurance.

It would not have felt like such a warm, welcoming place if not for the efforts of many members. A few examples will illustrate my point. Jim Potts and I worked with the staff at the diocese to create the service leaflet, but it was not ready to print until Thursday afternoon. This presented a problem for us, because it takes many hours for our copy machine to print 400 service leaflets, and someone has to be near the copy machine to unload copies, otherwise the machine will just stop

printing after ten or fifteen copies. So one of our members volunteered to sit in the office next to the copy machine for several hours, to unload the copies and reload the paper.

Another one of our members worked into the evening on Friday, I'm guessing at least four or five hours altogether, to make sure we had everything we needed for the worship service. This person never even met John Rohde, yet he was caring for John's friends as if they were his brothers and sisters.

One of our members has a very busy work schedule. Yesterday was a rare day off for them, and one of the last beautiful, warm days, when it's pleasant to be outside before winter arrives. But instead of being outside on their day off, this person was inside St. Paul's, running the LiveStream. More than 100 people were watching the service online. This is what Jesus is talking about: a blessed community of people welcoming and serving one another as brothers and sisters, mothers and children.

Our Gospel passage ends with this verse: "*Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.*" God's kingdom overturns our hierarchies. Each Sunday we have a little pageant to remind us that God's intention is for us to treat one another as equals, and to put aside the hierarchies we are constantly creating. It happens during the procession. In the procession at the beginning of worship, the person carrying the cross is always first and the priest or the bishop is always last.

Many of us have come to think that the last person in the procession is the most important, but that is exactly backwards from the symbolism of the procession. Many people assume that the priest or the bishop is the most important person in the worship service. They are not any better or more important than anyone else. The priest and the bishop are servants of everyone in the community, so in the procession they take the place of the lowliest servant, which is the last place in line.

We are following the example of Christ Jesus. This overturning of the hierarchies of the world is at the heart of our community as disciples of Jesus. We give up the hierarchies we have created in order to treat one another as equals. We give up our expectations of honor in order to share in a communal honor which is to be brothers and sisters to one another. We give up the security that comes from our wealth and our individualism in order to find true security, which comes from being together in this blessed community.