

Standing Up Straight

Mark 10: 17-31

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Most of you know that my mother-in-law, Carolyn Webb, has been in a nursing home for almost ten years. She had cancer and went through the series of chemo-therapy and all that. But one thing none of us anticipated about her cancer is that she began to slump terribly. Nothing in her back or shoulders were affected. Along with her slumping posture, she became more enfeebled in how she walked, and eventually quit walking. Her doctor noticed her slumping posture enough to prescribe some physical therapy for her. Her therapist kept working with her to straighten up those shoulders and hold her back straight. She exercised her legs every day and worked hard on re-learning how to stand up straight. “Stand up straight” became the mantra of everyone around her.

While Carolyn was going through the cancer treatments, it was as if she spent most of every day sitting slumped in her chair brooding and worrying until that brooding and worry shaped her.

As we all know, the lines we modern people like to draw between the physical, the emotional, the mental, the spiritual, the inward and the outward, the individual and the social, and so on, are all not as clearly defined. We are re-learning the ancient insight that we are whole persons. What goes on inside of us in one way shows up in other ways, sometimes in our posture.

I remember hearing an elderly, very southern woman say, “Posture is a mirror of the soul.” She said, “You can learn a lot about someone by looking at their posture.”

Our posture, the way we carry ourselves, our exterior physical demeanor, is an indication of what is going on within our souls.

Today’s Scripture from Mark mentions posture, at least indirectly. Did you hear it when we read it a moment ago?

In this very well known story, the rich young man comes to Jesus asking, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mk 10:17).

Jesus says with the standard answer: obey all of the commandments. Of course, obeying all of the commandments would be no small order. And yet, surprisingly, this young man says that he has done just that from the days of his youth.

Then Jesus, in the words of Mark, *“looking upon him loved him, and said to him, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come follow me.’ At that saying his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions”* (Mk 10:21-22).

I’ve always loved this expression – his countenance fell. His countenance became sorrowful. His countenance indicated his face, his whole posture. After this conversation with Jesus, the same Jesus who loved him, the young man felt not exhilaration, joy, or peace. His countenance fell. He slumped. He slumped down and was discouraged.

Did you know that this is the only place in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John where someone is directly invited to come with Jesus, and he walks away, refusing to be a disciple – and the reason is money?

Last week, we heard the story of the poor widow who gave all she had and this week we hear the story of the rich young man who can't give up what he has. Mark places these two stories near one another to show us the contrast of what it takes to be disciples.

This young man was well-to-do. Perhaps he believed he had great independence, freedom in life because we usually believe that if we just had enough we could do whatever we wanted to do. But what if he really wanted to follow Jesus? Apparently, he was not as free as he thought. After all, he couldn't just quit doing what he was doing even though he was bringing down some serious money. After all he had financial obligations. He had bills to pay. "Jesus, I want to follow you but it is after I pay the bills, work the math, and find the time." The story says that he had great possessions but I wonder if he was possessed by those possessions? He couldn't let go because they had him.

I talked to a big-church pastor in another city some time ago and he said to me, "I wish I was where you are. I wish I could pastor a smaller congregation like Austin Heights. Don't get me wrong, where I am is a good place but it is killing me. I never see my family; I don't have time to pray; and I never get to really be a pastor to my people. I'm too busy running here and there, meetings, committees, seeing someone for five minutes and then running to the next. I never read books anymore and I wish I had time to fool around with an old pickup like yours." He went on, "I make four times more money than you but I'm in so deep over my head that I can't leave where I am. I can't afford it. I want out and I'm stuck."

The young man could not let go of his things in order to grab hold of what Jesus offered him. Before him was the life of adventure as a disciple and the young man turned away to his things. And the young man walked away with his countenance fallen, slumped, downcast. Maybe he walked away slumped because he was carrying all of his stuff on his back.

This young man was enslaved. He was in bondage. So when Jesus asked him to let go of everything he had, this was not so much a burdensome command as a gracious promise. It was an invitation to a new life!

A few years ago I was listening to NPR and the Motley Fool program which is about economics, finance, investments, and so on. They were interviewing woman who has written a book called something like, “Why the Two-Income Family is Going Broke.” She was interesting, clear, practical and specific in what she had to say. One of the things she mentioned is that our parents’ generation lived on 89% of their income. They saved the other 11%. Currently, the average is that we live on 101% of our income. In other words, we are living in debt. We are enslaved. Our countenance is falling because we are carrying all of our stuff which keeps us from the life Jesus calls us.

Part of what tithing – giving 10% – teaches us is to live within 90%. And I remind you that biblically, the tithe is the minimum. It is the starting place which allows us to learn to live the adventurous life of discipleship instead of being enslaved by our possessions.

On one of my Duke trips a few years ago I was sitting in the Divinity School drinking coffee and struck up a conversation with a lean, young, divinity student. I asked him how he ended up in divinity school. He said that he had started off as a business major at a university in the South and ended up an Environmental Studies

major and then to seminary. I asked him how he made the transition from business to environmental science. He said that he had become a Christian in high school. “Someone had told me that when I gave my life to Christ that things would go well in my life. They said that I would have joy and God would bless me over and over. But then I read the story of the rich young man in Mark and that story turned me every which way but loose.” He went on, “I just went home and lay on my bed and cried. Cried all night. About dawn I prayed, ‘Okay, Jesus what do you want? What should I give up? How should I give up my life in order to follow you? Will you let me keep my stereo?’ So I studied and read and was in a discipleship group at church and I started volunteering down at the homeless shelter. Now I live out on a farm which grows organic food for the homeless and ride my bike to class each day. I sold my car and get my clothes from Goodwill.”

I asked him, “So what do you think? That person told you a long time ago that if you gave your life to Christ things would go better for you. So what do you think? Was he right or wrong?”

The young man said, “Oh, he was right but not in the way he thought and certainly not in the way I thought. God is relentless. Jesus never gives up. I started off trying to fit Jesus into my already planned life. But Jesus wouldn’t let up on me. Jesus still doesn’t let up on me. When I get out of seminary I hope to work somewhere else in the world as a missionary helping people feed themselves in ways that are healthy and whole. If I had stayed a business major, right now I’d be heading to work in an office cubicle with fluorescent lights over my head and stare at a computer screen all day. Jesus is hard. But what do you think is more interesting? Sitting in an office cubicle all day or digging ditches all day in South Asia helping starving people eat?”

It is true Jesus is hard. Both the young man in the divinity school and the young man in Mark would agree with that. But one young man walks away slumped and sad. The other one stands up straight.

What will it be for you?

Amen.