

It's Still Not Easy

October 13, 2024

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

Mark 10:17-31

Have you ever considered the curbstone?

It's not a new invention. There were curbstones in Pompeii, the Roman city buried by an eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79. They appear to have been a water control mechanism, because Pompeii didn't have underground drainage systems – sewers. Overflow from rain, fountains, and aqueducts went down the streets, which had high curbs to either side to prevent the water from entering the homes and shops.

These floods were apparently common enough that Pompeiians built stepping stones to allow people to cross the streets without stepping into the flowing water.

Most places, however, didn't have curbs along streets until the 19th and 20th centuries, when people began to seriously separate vehicle traffic from pedestrian traffic. That kept boots out of the mud – until you had to cross a street, so that didn't work all that well, did it? – and it kept people out from under carts and horses' hooves and, as the 20th century went on, the wheels of cars and trucks.

The unintended consequence of all this was to make it more difficult for people with a mobility disability to get around. A curb means an abrupt change in level. It could be managed with a sloped curb, but those take more time to shape and, perhaps, invite vehicles to cross into pedestrian spaces. Disabled people, already confronted with stairs inside of buildings, now had an additional barrier to surmount before they even entered a building.

Wealth – or at least affection for his possessions – became an obstacle for the man who spoke to Jesus. It prevented him from... well... if we take the words as they're written, it prevented him from inheriting eternal life. At least, it became a barrier to his access. A barrier he had the power to remove.

For a disabled person, however, the world is filled with barriers that other people placed, barriers that the disabled person cannot remove. Street curbs obstruct wheelchairs, and lights-only crosswalks restrict people with limited eyesight. Each of these can be changed, and since the American with Disabilities Act went into effect in 1990, many of them have been. Slowly. And sometimes rather painfully.

It's still not easy for disabled people.

The world, let's face it, is not always kind to human beings. We stub our toes on stones, we swelter in the heat, we shiver in the cold. These are things we cannot control. They affect people with disabilities, too, and sometimes those disabilities make it harder for affected people to make their way through the world. They find a way.

It's the ones that we people built, however, that rankle. It didn't have to be done that way. It can be reconfigured and upgraded, and... do we do it? Do we?

There was opposition to the passage of the ADA from institutions that didn't want to spend the money so that disabled people could get access to their goods and services, or even just their neighborhood.

They were shocked and came to the government angrily, because they had many possessions.

It still isn't easy to overcome that barrier we create for ourselves.

Sarah Hinlicky Wilson writes at Working Preacher, "Who can argue with Jesus on this one? We know he's right about the law and about the wealth. It's the double-bind of our Christian formation: this lesson is so deeply internalized that it's nearly impossible to hear it for the chasm in our lives of faith that it is."

Chasm seems like an overstatement. I'm not wealthy. I looked it up. I went to Pew Research Center's tool to determine whether I'm high, middle, or lower income, and found that I'm in the middle group, along with 56.8% of other residents of Hawai'i and 52% of Americans. I grant you that the results might be off because I didn't have my tax information handy, but they wouldn't be far wrong.

The world is bigger than Hawai'i or the United States of America, and it turns out that Pew has a worldwide income tool. Using that calculator, I join the 39.8% of people in the high income group.

Wait. 39.8% of people in the world are high income?

Oh. No. 39.8% of people living in "advanced economies" are high income.

According to World Vision, nearly 9% of the global population lives in extreme poverty, trying to survive on less than \$2.15 a day.

And it's still not easy.

It's still not easy to convince myself that I have this kind of privilege. But I do. I'm not struggling to make my car payment, or my medical bills, or my rent. I have struggled with those in my life. One day several years ago I didn't make a twenty mile round trip drive on the weekend because

I didn't think I had enough gas in the car, and I wouldn't have the money for gas until payday on Monday.

It's still not easy.

It's not easy because I worry more about the things I want than the ways I can help. It's not easy because I protect the things I like rather than sharing with people who don't have such things. It's not easy because I like my comfort, and I don't want to be uncomfortable.

What's going to happen if I take Jesus seriously and give these things up?

It's still not easy.

Mark wrote that Jesus "looking at him, loved him." Debie Thomas observes at JourneyWithJesus.net, "But notice that Jesus's love doesn't leave the young man where he is. In other words, Jesus's love isn't 'nice.' It doesn't prioritize the young man's comfort over his salvation. Jesus's love is provocative. It's incisive. It's sharp. Even as it offers unconditional welcome, it also offers mind-boggling challenge."

Are we ready for that challenge, which still isn't easy?

Heaven knows, from all available evidence, that I'm not.

Heaven knows that lots of the people of the world aren't ready, either. Two millennia after Jesus tried to squelch that silly notion that wealth is the result of virtue, we still credit rich people with undeserved righteousness. Clement of Alexandria had some pointed things to say about that in the second century: "Those who bestow laudatory addresses on the rich appear to me to be rightly judged not only flatterers and base... but also godless and treacherous..."

Bishop Clement didn't hold back.

I just learned a really unsettling story in this vein thanks to British historian Mark Felton. In a recent video, he described SS leader Heinrich Himmler's attempts to protect wealth that he and the SS had amassed over the course of Nazi power in Germany. The purpose was to make it available for a renewed Nazi party and Nazi state. Using the connections of German companies and industrialists, they transferred money to places it would not be seized by the Allies in Switzerland, South America, Scandinavia, and also Great Britain and the United States. British and American intelligence operatives discovered the program and... at least some of them got involved in it and benefited from it, including the US's chief intelligence officer in Europe, Allen Dulles. Why? As Dr. Felton said, "They were indeed like-minded: they liked money, and didn't mind where it came from."

They didn't even grieve over their many possessions, now did they?

Can we please stop pretending that wealth and virtue have any relationship with one another? It's true that poverty does not make people righteous, and that wealth does not make people unrighteous. It is also true that poverty does not make people sinful, and that wealth does not make people good.

Karoline Lewis writes at Working Preacher, "Let's just take Jesus literally. We do have too much. We need to give it away. We have not given out of our abundance. So we are eager to stand behind Jesus' injunctions against rich people. We readily chide those who hoard their wealth. We are quick to say to another, 'With all you have? Good luck getting through the eye of a needle, friend.' Yet all the while, we secretly wish we had wealth to hoard. Or at least more than we have. And then we have succeeded in wiggling out of Jesus' charge. 'I don't have money like this guy, so Jesus isn't talking to me.' And all of a sudden we've managed to escape Jesus' words to us, 'you lack one thing.'"

It's back to us, and it's still not easy. It's not easy to see those obstacles that we've made which are no barrier to us, but are to someone else. It's not easy to see the ways our situation of relative wealth or gender or social status blocks us from fully appreciating and receiving the love that Jesus has for us. It's not easy to accept Jesus' challenge to lay those precious things aside, those many precious things aside, and follow him.

It's still not easy to recognize that Jesus loves us and loved us first, and in that love both wants the best for us and wants the best of us.

It's still not easy. It's still our challenge. It's still Jesus' way.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson