

Give It Up for Jesus

Texts: Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Mark 10:17-22

For those who appreciate a sermon road map:

- 1) We are going to talk about what holds us back from following Jesus.
- 2) We are going to rewrite the story of the rich man.
- 3) And then we are going to imagine a church that lives without making judgments.

I hope you noticed the sermon title. When I chose it I didn't mean it as a cheer, as in "Yeah, let's give it up for Jeeessuss!"

I don't know why, but I have this vision of a monster truck competition in which Jesus is the guest superstar;

- There is an announcer with a microphone that has been suspended from the ceiling.
- He's bringing everyone to their feet.
- All the truck engines are revving up.
- And in a low bass voice that I can't imitate he heralds the grand entrance: "Let's give it up for Jesus!"

You can see it, too; I can tell. Yeah, I didn't mean that.

I meant give *it* up for Jesus, whatever *it* is for you. For the rich man it was his wealth, his combined money, property, possessions, slaves, all the members of his household. He walked away from Jesus grieving because he could not imagine life without his large estate.

What is *that* in your life? It owns you as a master owns a slave. It holds you back from giving yourself fully to God. You can more easily imagine a life without God than you can your "it."

Of course, money might in fact be your security too. It doesn't necessarily mean you have a lot of it, by the way. Money can be your master if you think that if only you had enough money your life would be everything that it isn't now.

But money is not the only thing that keeps people from God. Perhaps you've known people who cannot bring themselves to attend church, or to pray, or to seek God, or to do anything more than go through the religious motions because they don't feel good enough to do so. They might be ashamed or feel guilty about something.

Or maybe something is happening in their lives and they can't picture themselves in church because they can't imagine anyone in the church possibly understanding their lives.

Guilt or shame or a sense of being alone is their master. They can't see themselves apart from what they have done, as though they have committed the unpardonable sin. It's the man who can't see himself as anything but an adulterer. Or it's a woman who can't see herself as anything other than a person who failed at marriage, who broke the vow she made before God. Or it may be an addict who hates his or her life, who longs for God, but can't imagine ever being accepted in a holy place.

It's ironic, but guilt can cause a person to walk away from the very grace and forgiveness that they need.

Or the *it* can be your health. I know that sounds strange but let me tell you the story. An 80 year old man that you would not guess is much beyond 70 confided that his prayers were stuck in his throat – like water backs up when a drain is clogged.

On the face of it, on the surface, he was saying all the right things, doing what he always did, but if you were paying attention you could tell that his happy faces were a bit forced, and his steps had definitely slowed. If you paid close attention, you'd wonder if something might be wrong.

When I asked him about that, he told me about his last 12 months. His sleep was off – way off – and it was robbing him of energy. Sometimes, he said, the best he could manage in a day was half the morning; then he just had to sit. And as his sleeplessness went on for more than a month, a lot of other things started to feel off; again, way off.

Tom's deeper feelings began to show when he talked about his frustration over not being able to do what he had always done. He had always been the strong man in the family: the provider, the athletic dad, the strong husband who took pride in being sufficiently self-confident that he was happily married to an equally strong woman. But now he was clearly the weaker partner.

As a hobby, Tom was a chocolatier. Whenever Tom came to the church office bearing gifts, you knew that fabulous, delicious things came in his tiny little packages. You could also see that his pleasure in giving was equal to your pleasure in receiving. Tom had quit baking six months before.

As he talked, sometimes you saw sadness. There were also glimpses of anger. "I'm doing everything I know to do," he said, "and it isn't helping. I can't believe this is happening to me."

Tom had always followed the rules. Tom had always taken care of himself and had been good to take care of others.

Sadness. Anger. Disbelief. Asking all the "what ifs". When you put all of that together it sounds like grief. "Tom," I said, "think about all that you have lost in the last 12 months. You have this image of yourself that no longer describes you. I wonder if your prayers are stuck in your throat because you have a quarrel with God about getting old."

He got really quiet for a minute and then he said, "I hate it." In his grief, Tom wanted to turn from God, to create some distance, at precisely the time God would have had him walk closer. Health was Tom's *it*; being strong, fit and independent had become a condition for his faith. At 80 years old, Jesus was saying to Tom, "Come, brother, follow me."

Whatever *it* is, it defines you. It tells you who you are, what your place in the world is, and how everything fits together. Money can be it. A fixed image of yourself can be it, be it good or bad.

I've also seen an image of the ideal church become a barrier to following Jesus. People walk away from a congregation because the music doesn't suit them, or because the people change, or the pastor changes, or the church's understanding of God's will changes. Jesus says, "Follow me," and people say, "Not if you are leading us *there*," whatever "there" is.

Jesus says to every person and to every congregation, "Go, give *it* up, and then come and follow me."

I'll tell you how the encounter between Jesus and the rich man should have ended. This could have been the rich man's testimony. Listen to what he might have said:

You know the rich man I'm talking about! He had more than he deserved. He had more than he needed. And on that account, some people called him blessed beyond measure and other people called him a thief.

He didn't care which it was that people called him because he had his life and he had his things. He was as good as any God-fearing man, I assure you. I know because I was that rich man.

Looking at me now you would never believe it. You look at me now and ask yourself, "What in heaven's name happened to him? Why, O Lord, have you punished *him* so severely?"

But here is the truth: Jesus gave me poverty, he gifted me, he blessed me with poverty, so that I might become truly rich. My money - my possessions - everything I did to get it and to keep it - they were a chain binding my heart. I was a slave.

But because he said so, I sold it, gave it away, followed Jesus, and at that moment the burden left me. I hadn't even known how heavy it was to carry. Believe me when I say: I was as good as dead, but now I am alive. I was so lost, but now I am found.

That can be any one of us talking. Can you imagine it - walking away from whatever your "it" is, and experiencing the relief, the joy, the freedom that comes when you walk away from a master that isn't Jesus?

For the record, whatever your "it" is, Jesus knows it and a million other people before you have both clung to it and have given it up for Jesus. There is nothing new in your life or mine that God hasn't already seen.

To Jesus, every life is an open book. He knows the details of every page and chapter. He has seen it all, heard it all, and knows the outline of every story we might tell about ourselves.

He knows the false hopes, the false gods, the false promises.

He knows the usual and customary habits, the wrongs to which every generation is attracted, the evil that every person has done.

He knows the anger and bitterness that keep us from prayer. He knows the hurt, pain and betrayals that keep us from his love and the love of others.

And hear the good news: There is nothing that Jesus cannot undo. There is nothing from which he cannot free us. "For nothing," he says, "is impossible for God." "Let *it* go," says Jesus. Then come and follow me."

One last thing: Can you imagine a church where freedom in Christ is the organizing principle? We'd know in advance that as every person walked in the door, there would be something they are bringing to release - some page in the book that they want to either edit or turn- to learn from and then give it a better ending.

Come on in, we'd say. We've seen it all. We've heard it all. We've all got chapters of our own. But we are following Jesus here nonetheless.

We were all once dead, but we are living today. We were all once lost to God, but we are being found in Christ today.

Give it up for Jesus, this church would say, whatever your "*it*" might be. Believe us when we say: nothing is impossible for God. Amen.