

BOLD APPROACH, LOVING RESPONSE

Hebrews 4:12-16

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Mark 10:17-31

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TEXT: Hebrews 4:16 “Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

PURPOSE: To encourage us to bring all our needs to God in confidence that the response will be Christ’s true love for us.

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I love the scene from *The Wizard of Oz* where Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man and the Lion come into the presence of “the great and powerful Oz” carrying the broom of the wicked witch. Oz is terrifying, and the four are intimidated by his presence. Nonetheless, they boldly press their case and insist that Oz make good on his promise to give them what he said he could. The game is up when little Toto pulls back the curtain to expose the real Oz, a rather kindly old man who is running the “great and powerful” con game.

I wonder how many people feel like that foursome felt before Oz when we bring our hopes and hurts before God. God is beyond great and powerful. We are tiny creatures dwarfed in the heavenly throne room. Our needs, so urgent and pressing to us, are specks of dust on God’s plan for all creation. And then, there’s always the possibility that God will require more than a witch’s broom before God considers our request.

Neither of today’s scriptures starts out offering much to mitigate this image. The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that God’s word “is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before God no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.” (Hebrews 4:12-13) I hear that, and I say, thanks, but no thanks, I’m just looking for a little help, not for a piercing sword or for standing naked before the judge of all creation.

The story in Mark features a man kneeling before Jesus and asking, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Sounds like a proper address and an appropriately spiritual question to me. But Jesus initially responds rather brusquely— “don’t call me good, and besides, you already know the answer.” Why couldn’t Jesus express appreciation for the spiritual nature of the man’s request? If this is how Jesus treats people who aren’t ready to make a total commitment right out of the gate, why should we bring our concerns to him at all?

And the answer is, if whatever we are taking to the Lord in prayer is tearing up our insides or our outsides, we won't care how we are treated. Maybe we'll let the little stuff slide. But if our pain is unbearable, or our wound is incurable, or the injustice is intolerable, then, not any lack of courtesy, nor swords, nor the possibility of nakedness, nor the terrible majesty of the divine presence, will deter us from besieging heaven with our cries for help.

Some of you have been in exactly this situation. Your doctor says he thinks you need more tests, that something doesn't look the way it should, and the fog rolls in, and the fear fills you up, and you have no idea where to turn. Or that sweet little kid who not so long ago seemed so willing to please you is staying out late and cussing you out when you ask her where's she's been, and now the police have called you to come pick her up, and you are beyond helpless. Or your child is called up to serve in Afghanistan, and you glue yourself to the web sites that give the play by play action from over there, and you go crazy every time an unfamiliar car parks outside your house. Or something, some strange stirring, is bumping around inside you, keeping you restless all night and distracted all day, asking you why you've paid so little attention to the health of your soul, and you know you need to find some way to sort things out with God. It could be anything. But if it's big enough, we will take it to God without regard for what about approaching God might be unpleasant, and our prayers will be an army storming heaven's gates until we bash our way into God's presence.

I wonder if that was what was going on with the man who came to Jesus wanting to know what he had to do to inherit eternal life. What was keeping him awake at night that eventually came to be focused in that question? Was he facing death, and wondering if the life he was living was all the life there is? Or had he been being a good religious person, giving money to his church, serving on the boards of some charitable organizations, taking care of his parents in their old age, but still feeling that he and God weren't really in touch with each other? Whatever it was, he dared to make a bold approach to Jesus. And when Jesus seemed to brush him off – “you know the commandments” – he presented himself as righteous in every way – that's rather bold, too – except that he still was not at peace.

Right there in the story is where we learn what really happens when we take

our stuff to God. The text says that “Jesus, looking at him, loved him.” (Mark 10:21) Whatever developed from that crucial moment, it was going to be an expression of the love every one of us needs more than anything else. The truth is, this is exactly what takes place whenever we storm heaven’s gates, whenever we realize that we can’t get what we really need by our abilities alone. However else God may be dealing with us, God’s way is fundamentally the way of saving love. Our bold approach does not take us to the seat of judgement, but to the throne of grace. The one on whom we cast all our cares is, in the words of the Psalmist, “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” Our God “does not deal with us according to our sins, for as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is God’s steadfast love for those who fear God.” (Psalm 103:8-11) The passage from the Letter to the Hebrews doesn’t end with judgement, but with mercy. Even though God’s word lays us bare before God, the author invites us to “approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:16)

So Jesus’ word to the man seeking eternal life is a word of love: “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” (Mark 10:21) Here’s the thing about the love of God: it’s not designed to make us feel good; it’s designed to save our lives. It’s not designed to let us have our own way, but to draw us into the way of Jesus. It’s not designed to tell us what we want to hear, but to tell us what we need to hear if we are to inherit eternal life. That’s why the world of God is sharper than a two edged-sword—not because God gets a kick out of judging us, but because God’s love will do whatever it takes to draw us into the way of life.

I can remember a time in my life when I was approaching the throne of grace about as boldly as I think I could. Things were falling apart for me, and my attempts to handle the situation were making things worse. I cried out to God for mercy, and what I got was judgement. “David,” God said—not in human language, but, thank God, clearly enough for me to hear— “let me show you your harmful attitudes. Let me lay your hurtful actions here in front of you. Let me show you what you have to let go of if you are to receive what you are asking for.” “No, God,” I protested. “This isn’t what I wanted from you. I wanted you to make it so that things turned out the way I want them to turn out.” “The way *you* want them to turn out?” God asked, rather gently. “So then why do you think you need me?”

Can you catch the love in God's judgement? Do you see how the two-edged sword of God's word sliced me open and revealed truth that I would otherwise have avoided? By the grace of God, and only by the grace of God, I was able to see what God was showing me, and then, to walk the narrow way of life that God laid out before me. It was no fun at all, and the outcome was nothing like what I thought was best, but it was God delivering mercy and granting real help in time of need. In the end, it was Jesus making good for me on the promise he made to Peter, that anyone who lets go of what we value for his sake and for the sake of the good news will receive a hundredfold now in this age, and indeed, in the age to come, eternal life, that very thing the man thought he wanted more than anything else.

Maybe this morning you are bringing something to God, some hurt that needs healing, some brokenness that needs mending, some failure that needs fixing. Maybe something is stirring in you, as it stirred in the man who knelt before Jesus, that wants to know if there is more to life than meeting schedules and managing responsibilities and rearranging our possessions and feeling the futility of trying to have things our way. Maybe figuring out how you're going to approach God with your request has you feeling a bit like those characters coming into the presence of Oz. Maybe that two-edged sword is already revealing some things about you, and about what you're wanting that has you wondering if maybe you'd be better off not taking it to the Lord in prayer.

Guess what? You are in the right place, at the right time, with the right disposition. You are coming into the presence of the One who loves you exactly as you need to be loved. It can't be anything but unsettling to be loved in this way: after all, the ultimate expression of God's love for each of us is Christ crucified, God loving the world so much that God gave God's beloved Son so that everyone who trusts him doesn't perish, but rather, enters eternal life, experiences the life our creator designed us to live.

So therefore, go ahead and approach the throne of grace with boldness. If the two-edged sword comes into view, receive it as an expression of divine love for us. If you feel your heart's intentions being judged, remember that God knows what we need better than we do. And if you hear Jesus saying, 'you lack one thing,' hear his word as a word of saving love, custom-fitted to your exact circumstance, and pray for grace not to follow the man who held on to what he had, but rather, to follow that man who has what we need.