

# *One Hundredfold*

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Reading: Mark 10:17-31

## I.

Many years ago, my grandmother Naomi taught me to love going for walks. Over the years we would walk and walk, in the woods, on city streets, in the mountains, and through lovely parks. Every visit included a walk, until she was in her late eighties. We walked on two continents: in India when I was a little boy, and in various parts of the US when she and I had both gotten older.

Naomi used to teach me basic things about walking. For example, being a bit old-fashioned, (born in 1906) she insisted that I walk as a child on the street side, if we were on a city sidewalk. "It is what a gentleman does," she would tell me. "Why is that, Grandma?" Sharply, sweetly, softly she replied: "Well, I suppose it is to keep the lady from being splashed with mud or hit by a car. I know it may seem unfair to the man, but I am still rather uncomfortable by the curb." But those old school lessons were rare. Mostly she taught me to love walking because she loved it. And she taught me to walk by love, because she walked with Jesus.

Now I may have given you the mistaken impression that Grandma Naomi was traditional. I mean yes, she taught Adult Sunday School. But she was one of the acute socially progressive even sometimes radical bible study leaders. And for all her talk of being splashed—Grandma knew what it was to march for human rights as well as to stroll in the woods. And on those walks she would bring up topics dear to her heart, about the world of politics and justice and faith.

It was on a walk when I was a young adult. We were walking around the duck pond in Greenbelt MD. And she popped out with "It's hard to find a good church these days." She went on about how few churches seemed to bring three basics together: be excited about God, and about social justice concerns, and function in a real way as loving communities. Seemed like it was one or the other or at best two out of three. Responding, I was thinking about the radical call of Christ: "Well there's the sojourners community and then other places where people are trying to go all the way with their faith. You know intentional communities where it's share and share alike." My grandmother said "Yes I know." She was trying to be kind but she sounded a tad exasperated with her idealistic grandson. "But I don't mean those communities, I mean real churches—you know the kind where people live on their own but come together for worship...and to do ministry. Where you don't have to live in the same house."

## II.

There was another such conversation, long long ago. A man came to Jesus, in the midst of his walk with his disciples. His question was "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal

life?" Jesus proceeded to talk with him about the basics, and the gentleman already was doing it all. So then Jesus, initially skeptical, looked at him, really looked. And Jesus loved him. He said, "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."

The poor man went away shocked and grieving—because, we find out—he had a whole lot of possessions. And this is only the start of the story. Because when Jesus saw him leave, he was sad too. Then Jesus, grieving too, said one of the least popular things to quote in the entire New Testament. "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"

As usual the disciples didn't get it. Mark testifies that they were "perplexed." So Jesus clarified his earlier remark with his followers. "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God." Say what? Where's the prosperity gospel here? The disciples were still troubled because their entire world gave them the same messages our gives us—if you are rich you are blessed and smart and must be a good human. But if you are poor you are a failure and probably a criminal.

At this point you can tell that the disciples were starting to get nervous. Jesus tried to comfort them—God could even find room for some rich folk, God's grace trumps the inadequacies and failures of mortals! And then he must have looked on those disciples and loved them too, because when Simon Peter came to him saying, "Are we OK Jesus? Look, we've left everything to follow you," Jesus, knowing how much they had given up to follow him, let them know they were alright with God—and in their poverty they even had something way better than private wealth—though it was going to come with some hard times and trouble ahead. "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. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

This is about the closest Jesus gets to spelling out his very this-worldly vision for the church—can't you see it? We give up our security, our predilection with what's good for ourselves and those closest us—and we come together, living a new way, a way of love. And the miracle is that we find that wherever we go we have a home—hundreds of family we didn't know were family—strangers no more. We are rich to God and our neighbor. Oh, and persecutions. And trouble. Yeah—we are still talking about *this*-world problems! But we have a new sense of home, not just for ourselves, but for all of humanity, all of creation. And we find we receive more than we could ever give.

### III.

So it turns out my grandmother Naomi and I were having a very ancient conversation. On the one hand there's the radical disciples kinds of church where we are ready to give it all up for the sake of the poor, for the sake of our convictions about the gospel—sharing what we have, and giving most of it away. And on the other side there's us ordinary people, but we too give in a real way, sacrifice in real ways, love our neighbors in real and sometimes hard and not-so-ordinary ways.

I am convinced that Jesus in responding to his followers let them know that when it comes to the “real church”, it is a both/and situation, not an either or. *No one* who has given up their old lives in any significant way and entered into real and fresh new relationships because of Love *will fail* to experience something of the richness of new community to which Christ points. And yet, whether we are looking for the hippy Christian commune I used to long for or just what Grandma Naomi called a “Real church, you know, Peter,” it is still “hard to find a good church.”

So just what is a good church? Some define it with a style of music. Others insist on professionally led and profound worship. For example, (I can tell on her now, I think she would forgive me) even Grandma Naomi had her hopes for good worship. She hated it when the preacher said “I think.” One time she started putting little marks in her bulletin for every “I think.” She got to 86 I thinks. It was 86-- I think. More commonly we insist on one reading or another of the bible, and some insist on a particular series of doctrines about the holy trinity, and the birth of Mary, and Lord have mercy, details about the second coming.

Truly I say to you, that’s not what Jesus was concerned with in this passage in Mark’s gospel. What caught him up short was the deep divides created by wealth and privilege and possession. And he understood that sometimes what we think we own actually owns us. So he invited them and us to enter into a new movement, a new kind of community that could take many shapes. Self-interest would no longer reign supreme. Wealth would no longer define success. Family would no longer be clan against clan, Hatfields and McCoys, but rather we would find ourselves brought into a new tribe, a new family, a new alliance together, a gathering of the tribes of humanity.

I have visited many good churches in those years since I spoke with Grandma Naomi about the good church. I have been to cathedrals and communes, Quaker meetings and Catholic parishes, UCC churches and yes some amazing Baptist churches. And there are many more. And the conversation with my grandmother continues, as we still walk together in spirit. So Grandma Naomi, they *are* hard to find, but they still exist, and I still maintain some of them are places where people live together, but ok, well, you were right—some of them are “real churches” with people rich and poor, Black White and Latino, men and women children and elderly who are brought together by the power of Love....

That love—that love is so powerful that it can cause a person to find the courage to walk out of an abusive home. It is so powerful that it can cause people to eat together with strangers and offer hospitality to folk much of the world has written off. That love can cause some to harbor fugitives of persecution. It can make one take a chance on someone with whom you deeply disagree about a major issue—and I’m not talking about where to shop or what color of paint.

Wherever this kind of Love brings together very different people, be they 5 or 50 or 500 that’s a church: that is a real church. It is the friendship --- it is the willingness to be in community in a wide open risk-taking kind of way. When Jesus looked on that man—the one possessed by his possessions—he loved him. And he told him there was only one little thing standing between him and his calling. He offered him grace. And we don’t know the end of that

story. Perhaps he finally found what it took for him to let go of the things that stood between him and that Love. With God, no one gets written off.

God is real. God is not some far off distant thing. God is real—because God IS Love. And whether you are a member or are visiting for the first time, this morning you have stumbled into a real church—the kind where people will take a chance on you, take a chance on each other, offer hospitality to strangers and love to those who need it much. Oh, this is not a trouble-free zone. We all have our days. But we know Christ calls us to a better way, a world healed of the dividing walls of Possession, Wealth and Family that so much dominate our world. This corner is where we have landed up together—and we have found that in this new world, there are families upon families, houses upon houses! Not our inheritance—our community; our call; our redemption, our journey together. One hundredfold.