

Going into this reading, I was certain I knew what I wanted to preach about. It's the story of the rich man that thinks he does everything right until Jesus smacks him with some reality: if you really want to be the best, sell everything, give the proceeds to the poor, and follow me. The rich man can't stand it, so he runs away. We know this reading, right? Turns out there's a pretty significant detail I got wrong assuming I did. Problem is, different versions of this story show up in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In Luke, the guy that does everything right is introduced as "a certain ruler," and when he heard Jesus tell him to sell everything he had, "he became sad because he was very rich." That's the story I thought I was reading. But it's not. In Mark, he's just introduced as "a man" and in Matthew he's, and I quote in full, "someone." In both, the story unfolds the same, and he goes "away grieving for he had many possessions." Now, you could make the argument that having many possessions means this person's rich, but what if it doesn't? What if having many possessions just means he had a lot of stuff? You don't have to be rich to have a lot of stuff. How many things do you own? 100? I've got that many houseplants. 1,000? I've got that many books. CDs, neat rocks, hotel shampoo bottles...I've got a lot of stuff. And that got me to thinking. If the story is about a rich man, immediately I know it's not about me so I can watch it unfold, spot where the guy went wrong, and smirk as he runs away. But if the story's about someone with a lot of stuff, then it could be about me. And I don't like it all that much when Jesus looks at me 'cause it means I'm the one that needs to change. I liked this story a lot better when it was about someone else.

So, with all that stuff, what could I get rid of? This is a live question in Chez Cato since we're planning to build smaller than anywhere we've lived since seminary. There's some significant downsizing needs doing. Some things are gonna be easy to get rid of. How many keepsakes do we really need, especially when we can't remember where they came from? But what about all those books? Or the pajamas our old dog used to wear? Or the unused wedding gift that's moved with us four times and is the only reminder left of a grandparent who's gone onto glory? Sell it all, and give the money to the poor. I don't know if Jesus would've given this same answer to anyone that came his way. I don't know if he focused on possessions because he tailored the answer to the guy in front of him knowing that that was the one thing he'd have the hardest time with. I don't know, but it makes me wonder, if the question was tailored to the person, what would it be for me? If I saw Jesus on the sidewalk and he asked me to give something up, what could he ask that'd send me running the other direction? There's some horrific things, but I doubt he'd ask those. There's some ridiculous things, but that's not the hypothetical I'm interested in. But there are some real ones. Could I give up all my stuff? It'd be hard, but *maybe*. Could I give up cheese? I'm lactose intolerant and STILL that'd be hard. Could I give up love? Or my hearing? Or the eye that offends? Could I give up people I care about? My reason? The conclusions I've come to about God? I don't *think* Jesus would ask that, but I betcha the guy with all the possessions didn't think Jesus'd ask that either. But if there's anyone I'd give up something cherished for, it'd have to be Jesus. And if I'm honest, depending on what he asked, I may not be able to do it.

And now I'm wondering again. I'm wondering if there's anyone else I'd give up something cherished for. Maybe there's a small handful, but they're all very, very important to me. But for the most part, I'd probably roll my eyes with anyone else. Truth is, I've been on the receiving end of that. I've been the one given up many times. As an example, when I was so sick from Covid that I couldn't walk to the end of the block, someone very close to me chose lies about the disease and the man who told them over me because they were told they had to make a choice to give up the people they loved in favor of those lies, so they did. That choice cut a rift through my life, and it's still painful to talk about. No one wants to go through that, no one wants to be given up for much of anything, especially not a false reality. But Jesus didn't ask for that. Jesus doesn't ask us

to give up truth. Jesus doesn't ask us to give up science or future memories not yet made or the assumption that unconditional love'll continue unconditionally. No, Jesus is not the one who asks that. Jesus doesn't ask you to give up control of your body. Jesus doesn't ask you to give up your Mexican neighbor, your gay neighbor, any neighbor. Jesus doesn't ask you to give up reality, compassion, or kindness. There's a lot people are told they need to give up for someone these days, but that someone ain't Jesus. It makes me wonder where the line is. At what stage do people get asked to give up one more thing that's just too much? At what point do they turn and run the other way?

I was listening to a podcast the other day talking about the economic benefits for the middle class in 1930s Germany. The Nazis promised to repair the broken economy and make Germany great again. Hitler was already spewing hatred for the Jews and tipping his fascist hand, but if the party could do some good for the deutschmark, it might be worth putting the clown in power. Many thought they could control him and keep his extra extreme ideas in check, but they couldn't. Now, maybe you can't blame people for getting hoodwinked at the front end--debatable--but once they became aware of what was unfolding under his reign, they didn't stop him. Sometimes that was from a place of fear. Sometimes it wasn't within the scope of reality (like, what's a sausage maker on a farm supposed to do about the Fuhrer?). But sometimes it was a choice. A choice to give up freedoms, civility, and over 50 million human lives all because their retirement savings performed a little better. I know it's more complicated than that, but still, they chose to give up real, living people for their own gain. Now, obviously I don't know where things are heading, but the way things've been going and what people say out loud on national television for God's sake, it all makes me real nervous.

When Jesus asked that one guy to sell all his possessions, he didn't stop at "sell all your possessions." He kept going: "and give the money to the poor." This wasn't a grand test of loyalty, this was a refocusing of priorities onto those in the greatest need. This story doesn't teach us how to get your followers to sacrifice for your benefit. It teaches us to prioritize what's in our lives. What's so beautiful--and what makes Jesus so different from a cult leader--what's so beautiful is that when he talks about giving something up, it's not to line his own pockets. It's to meet the needs of someone else, especially those that need it the most. Instead of eliminating people in favor of profit, he eliminated profit in favor of people. Folks, when those seeking power talk about the things you cherish, look for why. When they tell you what they're gonna do with 'em, listen 'cause sometimes they slip up and accidentally tell you the truth. Who does that truth serve? Is it a holy gift or an empty gift? And when they tell you that the thing to give up is people, any kind of people, run. 'Cause regardless of what they tell you, that ain't Jesus.