

STEPPING OUT  
Mark 10: 17-31

Some 500 years before the birth of Jesus there lived a ruler in India. This powerful king had a son named Siddhartha Gautama. Born into privilege and wealth, Siddhartha was protected from anything unpleasant or unsettling. Wanting his son to succeed him, the ruler educated the young prince to become a warrior and a future king. Amidst the luxury and opulence, Siddhartha married at an early age a beautiful young princess. As they say, Siddhartha had it all-wealth, privilege, power, beauty-the stuff people all over the world dream about having.

Siddhartha lived in a large walled palace and was forbidden by his father to venture out. But the young prince disobeyed and at age 29 stepped out to see the world surrounding his gorgeous home. While visiting a nearby town, Siddhartha witnessed “Four Passing Sights” that changed his life. First, he saw an old man, crooked and toothless. Then he saw a sick man, wasted by disease. Then a corpse, on its way to cremation. Never before had the protected young prince been exposed to such things. Finally Siddhartha saw his fourth passing sight-a wandering holy man. This mystic seeker had no possessions, but he seemed to be at peace.

These four experiences shook Siddhartha to the core. He realized that his whole life up to that point had been a pleasant prison. He recognized that he himself would soon enough experience what he saw on the road-growing old, becoming ill, and finally tasting mortality. This is the common fate of humanity, no matter how thoroughly one tries to shield oneself from it. Thus his foray outside the palace threw Siddhartha into a deep depression, as he pondered the meaning of his life. Nor could he help thinking about that holy man wandering about in peace.

Finally, Siddhartha, the privileged prince, decided to escape. Legend tells how he took a last look at his sleeping family and rode to the edge of the palace grounds. There he gave his horse to his servant, removed his jewels, and cut off his long black hair. Putting on simple clothing, he stepped out into the world of suffering and death with only his questions. Eventually this event would be called the “Great Going Forth”. It was the beginning stages of what would later be called Buddhism.

It is interesting to ponder the lives of the founders of the great world religions. At least four of them tell of their founders leaving positions of privilege to follow their calling. Siddhartha leaves his pleasant prison to see if the wandering wise men can lead him beyond suffering. Moses leaves the privilege of Pharaoh's court to lead his people out of Egyptian bondage. Mohammed leaves his privileged position as a trader to lead his people out of idolatry. And Jesus leaves, as the old hymn suggests, the "ivory palaces" to enter a "world of woe." There is something deeply meaningful about a person of privilege and wealth volunteering to face the sufferings of the world.

That's why Jesus' encounter with a rich young man is so very powerful. Perhaps Jesus saw himself in the face of this young man who is deeply serious about his faith. Kneeling before Jesus, he asks the fundamental question, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And when Jesus tells him to obey the commandments of God, the wealthy young seeker assures Jesus he has done that all his life. Seeing that this young man has great potential, Jesus invites him to be his follower. "Go, sell what you have and follow me." Then Mark writes one of the most poignant verses in all the Gospels, "When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions."

Jesus must have also grieved when this potential convert to the Kingdom of God opted instead for the kingdom of wealth and privilege. Jesus then comments on the difficulty of following him when some are dragging so much stuff behind them. How hard it is, more difficult than a camel going through the eye of a needle. Everyone who has sacrificed what they have in order to follow Jesus knows this story existentially, in their guts. Even the disciples who had left everything to follow Jesus acknowledge the challenge the young man faced. It is then that Jesus assures his own followers that those who have abandoned everything will receive much in this age and even more in the age to come-eternal life. Stepping out has its blessings.

I have seen that in the lives of so many Christians I've known over the years. People who stepped out of their wealth and privilege to find deeper meaning in their discipleship. My friend Andrew Black strikes me that way. As many of you know, Andrew grew up here and in Santa Fe. His father is a federal judge and their family has enjoyed many blessings, especially the privilege of traveling to many places in the world. Three years ago Andrew and I traveled together to Peru on our Synod's mission trip. It is fitting that Andrew and his wife Jen are with us the weekend before our departure on the Synod's mission trip to China. Andrew, wish you were going with us! I really do.

Now with all these privileges Andrew has found himself through the years drawn to those in our society on the bottom rung of the economic ladder. As both an attorney and now an ordained Presbyterian pastor, Andrew has stepped out in so many ways to help those who struggle and struggle mightily just to survive. I sense in Andrew a genuine commitment and concern for the “least of these.”

Especially those living with HIV/AIDS. The opening meditation and the litany come from services Andrew has planned, liturgical resources our denomination has made available to all the churches. Andrew has shared with me his work in South Africa, Florida, and Louisville with those impacted by this world wide pandemic. And during our Adult CE hour Andrew will share with you the ministry of the church with our brothers and sisters living with HIV/AIDS.

Whenever I consider this issue, I think of my friend Jay Roberts. I met Jay in college. His father was a Boy Scout leader and a professor of New Testament Greek. In fact, when I first learned Greek, I studied a textbook written by his father. I went to Jay’s home often and got to know his family well. And I got to know Jay quite well, including the secret he tried to keep from his parents. Jay was gay, always had been. Jay and I had an understanding that we were friends and nothing more. To his great credit, Jay always respected my wishes.

I can say without exaggeration that Jay Roberts was one of the best friends I ever had. Once in college I had to write a twenty paper on Samuel Beckett’s play “Waiting for Godot”. At midnight I was totally exhausted and so I called Jay. This sounds very much like Jesus’ parable of the friend asking for help at midnight and it was. Jay came over and finished typing my paper, yes, typed since this was the days before computers. Jay finished at 6 a.m. when he woke me up. My paper was due at 8am that morning with a severe penalty for being late. Greater love has no friend than this that you stay up all night typing a research paper!

In 1970 I visited Jay in Columbia, Missouri, where he was finishing his doctorate degree in theater. It was one of the lowest times of my life, just after I had graduated from college and was subject to the draft for the Viet Nam War. Words can hardly describe what a comfort he was to me at that perilous moment in my life. Some years later I visited Jay in Nashville where he was teaching theater. Then in the early 80's I often visited Jay in San Francisco where he worked in a law office and volunteered at the San Francisco Opera. He took me back stage at the opera, a truly memorable time for a guy from a small town in East Texas. Jay introduced me to the gay/lesbian world of Haight-Ashbury where he lived. It was a world unlike any other I have ever experienced.

I will never forget the call I received from Jay with the bad news. He had been diagnosed with HIV. I flew out to San Francisco as soon as I could. I went with my friend to a large drug store where we stood in line with about forty other young men. Everyone was getting a prescription of a new drug called AZT to slow the progression of the virus. Jay in a rather matter of fact way said to me something I will never, "Frank, everyone in this line is dying." It stopped me in my tracks. I knew it was true for Jay and those forty young men, but I also knew it was true for me as well. It was the closest moment in my life to Siddhartha's Four Passing Sights. The suffering, the ageing, the dying-it's not just for someone else, it is my future also. The bell tolls for me as well.

Five years later I joined with other grief stricken friends at Golden Gate Park to scatter Jay's ashes into the Pacific Ocean. I cried for Jay and for many of Jay's friends then living with HIV/AIDS. Most of them have since died. As have countless millions across the world-men, women, and children.

Today the church of Jesus Christ invites us to step out of our privilege and wealth to care about the least of these our brothers and sisters. Sisters and brothers for whom Christ died. Brothers like Jay Roberts, a friend like no other. Gracious God, help us to step out, help us to care, as you care. Amen.