

Sermon
3 November 2019

I went to college at a small liberal arts college in Montgomery, Alabama —Huntington College. And when I say small, I mean small. It has grown some since, but when I was there it had 750 students. All of the freshmen were broken up into classes of 25 for liberal arts symposium. It was a class where we read and discussed Plato, learned basic concepts of logic, discussed and debated creation, evolution, ethics and so much more. The class was meant to change us—to challenge the way we think, to disrupt the assumptions we had made and the parroting our parents and friends that we had grown used to.

It all sounds great, and it was great. But we were 18 years old. And we were so sure that we were fully formed, fully grown, the smartest people on the planet. We didn't really go to college to be changed, we went to have a good time and have people affirm how very smart and together we were. And we didn't go to have the way we thought changed, since the things we thought were already fully formed and perfect. We really just wanted our professors to tell us how good we were doing.

And that's not too far a cry from where we find the Rich Young Ruler this morning. He comes to Jesus and says, "So, what is it that I need to do?" "Well, you know the commandments, you do these things?" "Sure do. (Tell me I'm great. Tell me how much I'm in like Flynn, the Rich Young Ruler thought.) "Great, " said Jesus. "There's only one thing left to do. Sell everything you've got and come and follow me." Wait... what?

Not exactly what he was going for. And I've got to think that not only was he not looking for that direction, he was pretty disappointed. This was supposed to be his big moment. His big "atta boy." This was supposed to be the moment that he heard that he had it all figured out.

Because here's the thing about this young man. He kind of had it all together. He was wealthy, young, AND a ruler. He followed the commandments. And he knew who he was. He knew what he was about. But what Jesus was asking was EVERYTHING. Think about this. His NAME in this story is THE RICH YOUNG RULER. So Jesus is basically telling him, take yourself, your very identity, your name and let it go. And so, rather than doing this thing, this crazy impossible thing that Jesus asked of him, he turns away sad and heads away. In fact, it says that he was dismayed at Jesus' statement and went away saddened.

Because once you've got your identity wrapped up in something, it's pretty hard to let it go. He is the rich young ruler. Who would he be without his possessions? What would they even call him?

I think about that freshman class of mine. All of us arguing over things we thought we had figured out, digging our heels in and shutting off any openness to an idea or perspective that didn't match the one we knew so well. Unwilling to give up that identity we had so carefully been shaping in our adolescence. "I've kept all of these things since I was a boy," the Rich

Young Ruler told Jesus. “We’ve known the right things since we were young,” we said. Believing that we were under control. Wrapped in the protective bubble wrap of the things we think we knew—about the world, about what’s right, about ourselves. We didn’t want to take the scary step out of those things we thought we had control over—our ideas, our identities. And so we held on tight, willing our identities and ideas to remain the same.

But here’s the thing, all of that changed anyway. We thought we could control these things and so we hung on and resisted the growth that was offered us. But the growth happened anyway. Slowly but surely, we were changed. As it would turn out, our identities weren’t set in stone the moment we turned 18. Imagine where we’d be if we had just embraced what was possible for us. If we had jumped into the deep end and said, “Let’s go. Make me into something new.”

But none of us really wants to do that. We want to stay like we are. Because we know what life is like as we are. We get to keep the illusion of control. And sometimes, that illusion is as good as the real thing.

We go to Jesus and we say, “What do you need me to do?” And Jesus says, “You know the commandments.” “Yes! We’re all over the commandments.” There’s only one thing left to do, Jesus says, give up the control you think you have. The grip you think you have on who you are and what that means.” Wherever we have built our identities—in our things, our work, our volunteering, our kids, our intellect—whatever it is, are you willing to loosen your grip on that? To open your hands and offer all that you are to God? Even if it means you’re not the same?

That’s the kind of meaningful risk we’re talking about. The kind that risks your illusion of control, that risks those things you’ve so carefully cultivated and says, all I am and all I have, it’s yours, God. No exceptions.

Those saints we celebrate today, what makes them saints is that something of their identity was wrapped up in Jesus and who Jesus was making them to be. And now we celebrate that their entire identity has been forever wrapped up in the almighty, that they are part of that great cloud of witnesses—those who teach us to live with hands open praying this prayer each day of our lives:

I am no longer my own, but yours.

Put me to what you will, place me with whom you will.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be put to work for you or set aside for you, Praised for you or criticized for you.

Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and fully surrender all things to your glory and service.

And now, O wonderful and holy God, Parent, Son, and Holy Spirit,
you are mine, and I am yours. So be it.

And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it also be made in heaven. Amen.