

Keep it 100

Mark 10:17-31; Hebrews 4:12-16

CWZepp, BWCOB, October 14, 2018

It's time to get real on a personal level, let's – "Keep it 100."

These were the words that most frequently introduced one of my favorite recurring segments on *The Nightly Show with Larry Wilmore*, which ran during Stephen Colbert's old time-slot on Comedy Central for a year and a half between 2015 and 2016. In the segment, Wilmore would challenge his guests to answer one or more controversial or morally ambiguous questions completely honestly on the spot. If the guests– in the opinion of the host or the audience – were completely real and honest in their responses, even if they didn't agree with the answer, they were given stickers that said "I Kept It 100." On the other hand, if Wilmore or the audience thought a guest was overthinking, evading, waffling, trying to be politically correct, or in any way being less than completely honest in their response, they would be given a bag – or sometimes multiple bags – of "weak tea" bearing the show's logo.¹

Some examples of the kinds of questions guests faced:

You have a chance to either play in the Super Bowl OR be there when your first child is being born – which do you do? (asked of a group of four men)

If your own beloved dog and a stranger are both drowning and you have the chance to save one – but only one – which do you save?

And one directed to New Jersey Senator Cory Booker on the very first episode of the show – Do you want to be president? (Booker's not-very-convincing "no" earned him the first weak tea bag awarded!)

Reading the gospels, you could easily get the feeling that Jesus would have made for a very interesting guest on this segment. He is constantly being questioned, often on quite difficult or morally ambiguous subjects, and generally in front of an audience ready to judge whether or not he was "Keeping it 100:"

Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?²

Which commandment is the greatest in the law?³

In the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?⁴

Are you the king of the Jews?⁵

Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? Tell us what you really think.⁶

Today's scripture gives us another of these great questions. Just as Jesus was getting ready to leave for another road trip, a fellow runs up to him, kneels down in deference and asks him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"⁷

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Nightly_Show_with_Larry_Wilmore #Recurring_segments

² Matthew 11:13, Luke 7:19-20

³ Matthew 22:36, Mark 12:28

⁴ John 8:5

⁵ Matthew 27:11, Mark 15:2, Luke 23:3, John 18:33

⁶ Matthew 22:17, Mark 12:14-15, Luke 20:22

Now if you are familiar with the gospels you know that it is exceedingly rare that Jesus actually does tell us what he really thinks. He answers a question with another question, draws in the dirt, tells a story. He is a master at redirecting. And this isn't Jesus' first rodeo. So he flips the question back on the inquirer. *Why do you call me good? Only God is good. And you already know the commandments – don't murder, don't steal, don't lie, don't cheat on your spouse, don't commit fraud, and honor your mother and father.*⁸ The man replies, *Yes – I've kept all of these since I was in Hebrew School.*

And in my imagination, at this point the man just keeps looking expectantly at Jesus. Waiting for more. Hoping for a real answer to his question. Begging Jesus to Keep it 100.

Now of course that pregnant pause is not actually in the text. And that insight into the inquiring man's mind is fictional. But it does say that Jesus looked at this man, and loved him.⁹ And that seems significant to me.

I must confess that I did not notice that small but think important detail in the text until well into my study this week. Like many of us do when reading familiar passages of scripture that exist in multiple gospel versions, I read today's gospel scripture through the lens of what I already knew about the story in its synchronized standard version. Which can be dangerous, at least in the sense of missing the important details that distinguish each version of the story. For instance – we all know this story is about a rich young ruler, right? Well, it depends on which gospel you are reading. Matthew is the only one who says he's young and only Luke characterizes him as a ruler. And all that commentary about how hard it is for wealthy people to enter the kingdom of God...Jesus must have been really put off with this show-off rich guy to be so harsh and judgy with him in front of everyone. Oh, whoops – that only happens in Luke. In both Matthew and Mark, the man leaves Jesus, and all the commentary about the camel and the eye of the needle is spoken privately to the disciples, who are surprised that Jesus is – once again – subverting conventional wisdom, this time the scripturally based belief that wealth was a sign of God's blessing.

It is really easy to do – mingling the stories like that. Which is why it is such a gift and privilege to earn my bread and butter partially by spending time intentionally revisiting and rereading these familiar stories. One of the things I most appreciate and to which I even look forward in the process of sermon preparation is that moment when I read a scripture text for the umpteenth time, and something new and previously unnoticed “pops.” Or I am reading the 13th commentary or blog or old sermon or whatever and the author points out something in the text that I had never previously noticed.

That's what happened with this story about the rich man who asked Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. I had not previously noticed the note – only in Mark's version of the story – that Jesus looked on this man with love. I guess I had always imagined this inquirer as either a self-righteous snob who was trying to justify himself or as an antagonist. So often these difficult questions are only thinly veiled public attempts by the scribes and Pharisees at playing “gotcha journalism” – trying to trick Jesus into digging his own grave with his own

⁷ Mark 10:17

⁸ Mark 10:18-19

⁹ Mark 10:21

words. This is, in fact, exactly what was happening earlier in chapter 10 when the Pharisees tried to test Jesus by asking about the lawfulness of divorce.¹⁰

But I don't think that is what was happening in this story, at least as it is told in Mark's gospel. And it is those few words noting that Jesus looked at this fellow and loved him that clued me in to the difference. Because if we don't have a self-righteous rich guy seeking public affirmation or someone trying to get Jesus to say something controversial or self-defeating, what *do* we have? I think we have an honest question, from a sincere seeker. We have a man who genuinely wants Jesus to give him a straight, 100 percent real, honest-to-God answer to his question. What do I need to do to inherit eternal life?

Barbara Brown Taylor notes that this is the kind of question that only a wealthy man would ask – “someone whose bills are paid, whose income is secure, someone who is not preoccupied by...questions such as, ‘where can I find a job?’ or ‘How can I feed my family?’ This man is free of those particular concerns.”¹¹ He is also free of concern about his faithfulness, as evidenced by the confidence with which he responds to Jesus' recitation of the commandments. He is an upstanding, faithful man, and he knows it – probably not in a pompous, self-important way, but with the assurance of someone who has known and followed the law of God his entire life, and who is self-aware enough to recognize both the position and privilege he has, and also the realization that it isn't enough. And so – being the high-achieving type – he wants to know what more he has to do.

And that is where I relish the picture Mark gives us of Jesus looking at this man and loving him. Knowing him – deeply and completely – and loving him. Loving him enough to “Keep it 100” – to give him the truth and nothing but the truth – a hard but honest, straight talking answer to the question he asked.

Jesus could have pointed out to the man that you can't *do* anything to inherit eternal life. By definition, an inheritance is received, not earned. And Jesus could have pointed out that there are other commandments that he didn't mention – most notably the first couple about not having any other gods or idols except God alone – but there aren't really any measureable outcomes related to these commandments, at least at their deep level, and this guy wanted to know what he had to *do*. So Jesus gave him something to do – “sell all your stuff, divest yourself from all your wealth and privilege, give it away to the poor, and then come and follow me.”

I guess that this proves once again the adage that you should be careful what you ask for, because you just might get it. This man wanted an honest answer, and Jesus gave him one. This man wanted Jesus to “Keep it 100”, and so Jesus asked him to give it – 100% of himself and all that he has.

Now if I am going to “Keep it 100” myself, this is the part of the story that gets under my skin. Not because I think that this story should be universalized to suggest that anyone with wealth needs to take a vow of poverty to follow Jesus. But because there is something in the dejection of the man that resonates deeply with me when he walks away from Jesus and his invitation to follow him.

¹⁰ Mark 10:2

¹¹ “The Opposite of Rich.” *The Preaching Life*. (1993). pp 121-122.

Did you know this is the ONLY story in the gospel where Jesus explicitly invites someone to follow him, and they do not? But truth be told, this is encounter that I really understand. Dropping your nets and leaving your father on the fishing boat to go all in with a guy you just met? Can't really relate. But a person of privilege working hard to do everything expected of you (and then some) and trying to learn from one whom you respect? Counting the cost and weighing the options of a proposed lifestyle change and coming to the conclusion that I'm just not ready or up to that challenge right now, or maybe it just isn't what I want right now, even though that realization comes with great disappointment? *That* I understand.

It is tempting to make this story all about wealth. But I think it is really about discipleship, and *anything* that gets in the way of our ability to commit 100% to following Jesus. Which is why it is so hard for those of us who know wealth and power and privilege to be disciples. As William Willimon notes:

One of the good things about having money is that you have great independence. You don't have to be jerked around by the boss when you are the boss. You have enough money to go when you want to go, to go how you want to go, to go where you want to go. isn't that one of the major reasons why we are busy accumulating possessions? We want to be independent. We want to be "on our own."¹²

That kind of freedom and independence is hard to give up. And frankly, I'm not sure why we would want to.

Except...except for that nagging, persistent feeling. That deep-down in the marrow sense that this life is about more than...well, just...more. And then we hear a story about Jesus, or we're challenged by the example of a friend or acquaintance, or we hear that still small voice in the night. And Jesus calls us...invites us...to follow. To stop pursuing all the things we think we have to pursue in this life – whether wealth or status, relationships or security – to give them up, and start pursuing him and his way. And we wonder...maybe it would be worth it. And then again, maybe not. It's a lot to ask.

Yes. God knows it is.

Which brings me back to that little detail about this man who wanted Jesus to "Keep it 100" and let him know what he had to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus looked at him and loved him. And I think he got it. He knew this guy in all his strength and weakness, his good intentions and his reluctance to give up the power and privilege that his wealth afforded him. And I think he probably saw and loved in him what he sees and loves in so many of us – that deep-down longing for something more. And so Jesus invited him to join him. It wasn't a command. It wasn't a judgment. It was a genuine invitation – to join him in a life 100% devoted to the Way; to let go of the things that would get in the way of that journey, and to follow him.

I have to believe we have that same invitation. And God only knows what it is that gets in *our* way of following Christ. But if we are honest with ourselves – if we keep it 100 – we probably also know what those things are our own lives. And deep down, I think we also probably know what we are called to do about it.

And so the question is for us as it was for this rich man whom Jesus looked at, knew, and loved...Will we?

¹² "Standing Up Straight." *Pulpit Resource*. Vol. 28, No. 4 (2000). p 13.