

**“Letting It All Go”**  
**Mark 10:17-31**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**20<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost**  
**October 4, 2015**

Every time I hear this text, I think “I am so far from living like Jesus wants me to live.” I know that Christ calls us to give up everything and follow him and I like to think that if God were to strike a deal with Satan and strip everything away like a modern day story of Job, I’d still be faithful – that the things – the house, the car, the pension, the choices, the privilege – are not that important to me. But then I think to myself, well if the things aren’t that important, then why don’t you give them up? If God really is at the center of your life, then why don’t you forsake everything and follow him?

So I was intrigued when I heard about Daryl Watson, a young playwright in New York, who in 2009 gave away everything he owned, changed his name to “Peace Pilgrim” and set out to walk from Delaware to California. Daryl had been a devout Christian as a teenager, but had drifted from the church. He wanted to find out, in his own words, his mission statement. He wanted an answer from God. He fasted and prayed, studied under a shaman, and took a trip to the Holy Land. But none of this worked. None of it was enough. That’s when he came across the story of a woman named “Peace Pilgrim” who walked across the country for 28 years. She followed Jesus’ directives literally, relying on the kindness and generosity of strangers. Daryl wanted this. He sold everything and put the cash in an envelope that he planned to give to charity. He wiped his computer clean and left it along with his cell phone in the hotel where he stayed the night before he embarked on his journey, with a note for the cleaning staff to take it.

I think one of the reasons the story of the rich man is so disturbing to so many of us is that he really wants to do what is right. He wants to be faithful to God. He follows the commandments, does what he is supposed to do. If anyone is faithful, then it’s this guy. Unlike some of the other religious characters in Mark’s Gospel, this man is sincere. He’s a lot like many of the people I meet in the church. People who *want* to do what is right. People who sincerely *want* to be faithful. But following all the rules isn’t enough, according to Jesus, not for this man. He’s got to give it all away.

Back in Delaware, Daryl tried to give away his money, roughly \$2000. He walked past a church and talked with its pastor. He tried to give him the money but the pastor thought he had stolen it. So they struck up a conversation and Daryl said he was walking for peace. The pastor said, “Well, you know the only way to peace is through Jesus.” Daryl said “Yes, yes, I understand that. I used to believe it myself. But I disagree.” A heated theological debate ensued and the pastor refused to take the money. “Jesus said to the disciples, if you go into a town, and you try and spread the gospel and they don’t hear you, you leave the town and wipe the dirt off your feet” the pastor told Daryl, “[so] I wipe my feet off at you.” So Daryl went on his way, wrote “for charity” on the envelope and dropped it in the first mailbox he saw. He

slept on the steps of the Catholic Church that night. It was cold and he had no sleeping bag.

Sometimes I wonder what good giving everything away would actually do for anybody. Would it help the poor or just make me feel more faithful? On my own search in college, I forsook the college campus on many weekends for several small, poor communities in the eastern part of NC. I wanted to do what was right. I wanted to give my life for justice which was as close as I come to Jesus at the time. One night, in a tiny town, where I was sleeping on the floor of a small African-American church, one of the leaders of the all black community asked me what I thought I was doing coming out here on the weekends. I didn't know how to answer. "This is how I want to spend my life," I said. "You know, in the struggle." The leader looked at me, thoroughly unconvinced. "You want to help? Then go back home and tell your people to stop oppressing mine."

Sometimes the things Christ calls us to let go of can't be jettisoned by leaving them behind. Sometimes the things Christ calls us to let go of have to be relinquished by staying put instead of imagining we can flee from them.

On day two, Daryl made it to a college town. In a fast food restaurant, where he drank free water, a college student noticed him. After learning about his mission the college student took off his red sweatshirt and gave it to him. "You're going to need this more than me," he told Daryl. The college student was right. Daryl was totally unprepared for this trip. He had done little hiking – ever. He didn't have warm clothes. He had no food. By day three, he realized he was in trouble. He tried to keep his mind on God. But the cold was much colder than he was prepared for, no one had offered him shelter and he was afraid. At two in the morning after a police officer refused to let him get warm in his squad car, Daryl passed a billboard that said, "It's okay to make mistakes, as long as they're new ones." It was as close as he had come to a sign from God. He couldn't walk anymore and he knew it. So he found a hotel with a sympathetic manager and he called his mom. In the bath, in the room that his mother had rented for him that night, he realized that the urgency behind the questions that had first driven him to give up everything had vanished. The questions were important, but having the answers to those questions seemed less so.<sup>1</sup>

I know that Jesus calls us to follow him, but I'm not always sure where. I know that following him necessarily means leaving a lot behind. It means leaving behind the idols of money, material things, nation, and even family when those things distract us from the good. And this is good news. We don't need much in life to know the fullness of God's love and salvation. We don't need much to love our neighbor as ourselves, to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. A lot of what we crave after, what we put in our storehouses, what we are tempted by, what we thirst after – a lot of it are things that cannot satisfy – poor substitutes for our real craving. Self-medications that dampen the symptoms of our thirst without ever quenching it. Jesus calls us to leave the things that cloud us from communion with God.

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<sup>1</sup> Elna Baker interviewed Daryl Watson, <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/483/self-improvement-kick?act=1>.

But leaving is only half of the call. Jesus calls us toward God and toward the world that God is creating. Toward a world where family is marked not by the hierarchies of the world, but by the loving kindness and open hospitality marked by the family of Jesus. Toward a world where things are tools are to be used for healing, and loving, and making people whole. Toward a world where nations measure their success in how well the least vulnerable in our world are faring. Toward a world where violence and racism are forsaken, where fear and the things we use to insulate ourselves from its affects are relinquished.

Jesus calls us away from the things that don't give life toward a relationship at the root of all life. And that life can't be entered through self-improvement. It can't be entered into by make the right choices to be obedient to the right rules, or obedient to the right set of faith doctrines. That's what makes the Christian gospel so difficult for any of us to finally accept or even understand. That life can't be entered into by working harder to be more spiritual than anyone else, or more frugal than anyone else, or more righteous than anyone else or more obedient than anyone else. It can only be entered into as a child – as one who experiences life as a gift that we do not earn and cannot secure. A gift that depends on someone, on something, other than myself. A life that is good at its roots because it was given to us freely by God.

And while I don't believe that God calls all of us to give away every single thing under our temporary possession, I do know that it's hard to know the freedom of that gift of life if we think we have earned it. And it is hard to know that freedom if we are afraid to lose it. It's hard to enter the kingdom in any way other than by resting in the grace of God.

In 2013, Bono presented Warren Buffet with a Forbes lifetime achievement award for Philanthropy. Buffet continues to give away billions of dollars and has pledged to give away his entire \$58 billion fortune within ten years after his death. But Buffett himself saw the hypocrisy of receiving such an award. "The truth is I have never given a penny away that had any utility to me," Buffett told the 150-plus billionaires and near-billionaires, who gathered at the United Nations Delegates Dining Room. "I am very grateful for this award, I accept this award. But I'd like to accept it not only for myself but for those millions of people who really give away money that's important to them because they see somebody else where they think they can do more good."<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Buffett seemed to understand that pure generosity always thinks first about the impact of giving on someone other than the giver, a kind of generosity that Mr. Buffett will probably never fully know. It's hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom. Then again it's impossible for anyone to be saved. Only God is good and nothing is impossible for this God.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.forbes.com/sites/randalllane/2013/11/18/the-50-philanthropists-who-have-given-away-the-most-money/>