

FLIPPED: Risk & Reward
2016 Lenten Preaching Series
February 14, 2016
The Monroe Congregational Church

Mark 10:17-31

During Lent, preaching themes at MCC will focus on how Jesus flips our world upside down when he shares the gospel. What we think is going to be one thing, becomes a second, unexpected thing. Today's story of the Rich Young Ruler is the first installment.

Author Brene' Brown insists that being vulnerable and open in your truth is freedom. And yet, the story that I'd like to share with you today crosses the line of "*what a preacher should self-disclose to her congregation*". I'm going to tell it because it is the truth and you are worth the risk!

Some of you may know that a number of years ago, my husband Clark took a big risk. He left his sales job, after a number of years earning seniority and building a client base, to train to become an inner-city high school history teacher. We imagined it would be an easy shift to make, given he already had a history degree and likes to be around teens.

This was going to be his way of living the gospel and walking his talk.

He enrolled in a training program and earned his 6-12th grade certification, which meant he could apply for an open position. Some wonderful people with all kinds of connections wrote letters of recommendation for him (some of them are in this room today!) He applied for a few job openings, but was disappointed to not get called in for an interview.

Still hopeful, next he applied to be a substitute teacher in Bridgeport and New Haven. He began as a study hall monitor, which was rough. One day in the hallway of Central High he saw a fight begin to break out. Although he was cautioned to not get involved, instinct took over and he maneuvered himself between the two young men, which broke it up.

He hoped that his contribution would lead to him getting the next crack at an opening. But it didn't. A few weeks later he was offered another temp position in New Haven for a dollar more an hour. He took it because the principal who hired him hinted that if he did well she just might offer him the next open job. When the opening came, it was filled the same day by a teacher from another school. He wasn't even given the courtesy of an interview.

I'm not telling you this story so that you may pity him or my family. Some things in the life just don't work out, despite our best intentions. I also don't want to discourage any of you who are considering a similar change. I'm sharing it because his story reminds me of the kind of sacrifice that Jesus was inviting that rich young man in today's story to make, one that involved a lot of risk without a guarantee of reward... at least one he could financially measure.

Clark continued to search, working occasionally as a substitute teacher. As you know, subs do not get paid days off, or health insurance. No vacation time. After about three years, we came to a breaking point and had to make some tough decisions.

We could call our parents and ask for help, but they had their issues and we didn't want to burden them with worry. We could cut back on charitable giving to the church and other organizations, but no - that would be too heartbreaking. We were certain that our priorities were good and that we were following the right path, the one that Jesus would lead us to take.

But then there was one Saturday when we realized that after paying bills and our church pledge, our bank account held a total of four dollars. To make matters more exciting, our credit cards were maxed out, our refrigerator was empty and one of the cars was running on fumes. We had to find a way to make it through five days until I was paid.

So we did something I never thought we'd do, and went to see Fast Eddy (a pawn broker in New Haven) and sold the wedding ring my husband had worn for almost 20 years. It was worth \$99 of scrap gold. Thankfully, that was enough to put a little gas in our tank and food on our table.

There are people in the world who make difficult choices like this all the time. In the developing world, most people make less than a dollar a day, and we cannot forget how agonizing hunger and homelessness can be.

The following Monday, Clark went back into sales for a while. He is now on a new path working with the Monroe PD as a dispatcher. We are so grateful for the new start and for those of you who supported us with prayer and recommendations. He's not here this morning because he is on duty, supporting the people of Monroe and the police officers who keep us safe.

Today in scripture we met a rich man who came to Jesus because, even though he followed the commandments and obtained his wealth in honest ways, he doesn't feel fulfilled. There is a spiritual agitation in him. He had not let God change him for a while. It is the unrest in the man's soul that Jesus seeks to address.

On one hand, this story calls people of faith to deeply and profoundly wrestle with the power that wealth has in our society. We can argue over statistics about income inequality. Or we can look at the person who has more than us and feel jealous. But what we cannot do is deny that Jesus repeatedly and clearly tells his followers to care for the poor.

Maybe that's the work that some of us are directly called to today.

This rich young man, someone who has everything he needs and has done everything right still feels unfulfilled. He just couldn't take the risk of letting go of his stuff. Feeling caught between a desire to follow the gospel and the reality of doing so may create a kind of unrest in us.

For nearly 9 years I have watched people from this church cook, deliver and serve a meal at St. George's Supper, a community dinner for the poor and underemployed in Bridgeport. The first few times someone new goes to serve, I hear them come back saying, *"Wow, meeting those people makes me so thankful I have what I have, good food, family, and a home."*

And that is a faithful response.

But if they keep going back, they soon become frustrated at how these people are kept in poverty. They begin to recognize their own privilege and say that it isn't fair, it isn't right. They might question why so many payday loan companies and liquor store are located in the neighborhoods of the working poor, or how slumlords can sleep at night charging high rent for such shoddy apartments, or why there is such limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables for inner city families that such a thing as a "food desert" even exists in one of the wealthiest counties in the United States.

But if they continue going, some will push through the anger and say, "*I am going to try to live more simply, to give away some of what I have, find other ways to help.*" By this time they have been changed; serving the meal has become part of part of who they are. It influences their priorities and the way they live.

That is true transformation; God's Spirit challenging our blind spots, stirring up our agitations and lovingly growing us into a new creation.

The book of the prophet Jeremiah uses the image of God as a master potter remolding clay into a new creation. It is not easy work for the potter, nor for the clay. It is risky work, for many reasons. A newly formed vessel can collapse in on itself. The clay can dry out and lose its ability to be changed. The Potter needs powerful hands and the clay has to remain pliable, so that it can be reshaped into something new and even more beautiful. And there's the reward. Amen.