

Thursday in the Fifth Week after Epiphany: February 11, 2021

In Galilee, Jesus continues his journey, stopping to address conflict among his closest followers, to answer questions posed by the religious authorities in their growing opposition to his ministry, and then to bless the children among the crowds. Jesus reminds his closest followers a second time that he would suffer, being subject to a great deal of abuse and violence on his journey ahead.

Read Mark 10:17-31. What catches my attention about the gospel reading?

At the beginning of another part of his journey, Jesus is confronted by one of the wealthy who has a flair for the dramatic. This man kneels in front of Jesus, indicating a willingness to recognize the authority communicated by Jesus through ongoing teaching moments and healing the afflicted in the crowds. This man identifies Jesus as being a “Good Teacher”. This man is direct in posing his question, **“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Mark 10:17.** Jesus respects the integrity of this man. Jesus gazes at him, communicating the strength and glory of his love for this wealthy person. Jesus asks this man if he has followed the commandments set out by Moses in treating people as Creator and Great Spirit expects of human beings. Jesus learns that this man has been practicing this way of life since his youth, learning from his parents, his grandparents, extended family members, and those providing leadership in his worshipping community. Jesus answers his question by pointing out what those closest to him need to do in order to follow him, saying **“Go! Sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then, come follow me!” Mark 10:21.** Jesus too has a flair for the dramatic.

The one with great wealth was shocked by this teaching of Jesus, leaving with a great burden of grief due to the wealth which he had amassed in his lifetime.

Those closest to Jesus were also perplexed. In the faith of their ancestors, Creator and Great Spirit were expected to bless those who lived by the spirit and intention of the commandments spelled out by Moses. The faithful followers expected to be blessed with wealth, children, grandchildren, lands, and good health. Those closest to Jesus are alarmed and profoundly disturbed, asking each other **“Then who can be saved?” Mark 10: 26.** Jesus challenges their core beliefs about the blessing which Creator and Great Spirit will bestow upon them in the years ahead.

Jesus teaches that human beings through our own efforts cannot gain eternal life and that Creator and Great Spirit have the capacity to create the possibility of new life beyond space and time.

Peter points out to Jesus that those closest to him already have given up everything in order to follow him through the hills of Galilee and along the path which Jesus walks.

Jesus confirms what those who have left behind family, friends, property, and livelihoods will be given new family members, new friends, and new ways to live in this creation as gifts from Creator and Great Spirit. However, Jesus also points out that those who follow him will also suffer, experience rejection, and be persecuted for living out the good news central to his teachings and works of healing.

Reread Mark 10:17-31. What is God saying to us in this passage?

The Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island open themselves to the generosity of Creator and Great Spirit demonstrated each and every day. In her book **BRAIDING SWEETGRASS: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants** (Milkwood Editions, 2013), Robin Wall Kimmerer recounts how Citizen Potawatomi Nation managed to survive after their removal from the Great Lakes area on the American side of the border to their shared reserve on the west side of the Mississippi River in Kansas and then finally to their allotments on the prairies of Oklahoma. After a long hot summer in 1895, a group of brothers tried fishing in the bottomlands of the Canadian River. The earth had been scorched by the heat of the sun and the waters had been reduced to a small channel flowing through groves of shady trees. The prickly grasses forced these barefoot boys to dance like Grass Dancers across the sunburnt prairie. The fish were not biting so these boys followed what was left of the stream back towards their home without a fresh catch to eat with their biscuits and redeye gravy. Poverty and drought had taken its toll, leaving their ribs easy to see in their dungarees. One the brothers stubbed his toe on something round and hard hidden in the long grass. First, there was one and then another and then another and then still another until it was hard to walk. He picks up one of the hard, green balls and whips it at his brother. With enthusiasm, he shouts, “Piganek!” and begins picking them up. He encourages his brother to pick them up too. Their pockets were easily filled so they took off their dungarees, tied off the legs and waist with twine, and filled them from the abundance laying in the grass. Pigan is Anishinaabemowin for “nut”. The brothers hate to go home empty handed so on this day, they ran in their underwear holding up their dungarees filled with these nuts to give to their mother. The brother who found the pecans and brought them home was Dr. Kimmerer’s grandfather.

Around the Great Lakes, the Potawatomi Peoples were familiar with hickories, black walnuts, and butternuts. In Kansas and then in Oklahoma, the Potawatomi Peoples found another kind of hickory growing along the rivers in groves, the pecan hickories, delicious and plentiful. This important source of food provided much needed protein, vitamins, and fats. Creator and Great Spirit continued to provide these trees as these gifts for survival for the People of the Forest and Lakes. In 1895, these nuts were boiled and made into a form of porridge. The fat floated up to the top so it was skimmed and stored as a nut butter. Unlike juicy berries and other fruit which offer themselves to eat immediately before spoiling, nuts protect themselves with a hard shell and a green, leathery husk so they can be eaten later. Pecans can be squirreled away in cellars to be eaten when animals and birds were scarce later as the cold winter months stretch towards spring.

As a biologist, Dr. Kimmerer noted that nut trees do not produce a crop every year but produce nuts in unpredictable intervals. For mast fruiting to happen in generating new forests, each tree has to make lots of nuts so that there are far more nuts than seed predators can gather. With the need to produce so many high caloric nuts during mast fruiting years, trees take years to build up sugars within the tree, building up calories as starches in the roots. A surplus of calories needs to accumulate. Tree physiologists and evolutionary biologists have developed a number of hypotheses to explain the boom-and-bust cycles of mast fruiting. Forest ecologists hypothesize that a tree will produce nuts when the tree can afford to do so. With such a theory, each tree would produce nuts according to its own supplies of starch. However, with mast fruiting, all of the trees produce nuts in large quantities at the

same time. Hickory pecan trees act together, not as individual trees nor as particular groves of trees but as trees all across the countryside. These hickory trees teach the Elders that concerted effort together can protect each other and provide the means to survive. For the Elders, the spirits of the trees take council together and talk with each other, working together to follow their Original Instructions to provide for their relatives the Human Beings. When the Mission Potawatomi People met under a grove of hickory pecan trees in Kansas, the Council of the Pecans was ignored: Stick together, act as one. Yet, mast fruiting in September 1895 produced a feast for Human Beings as well as a host of other small animals who gather nuts for the coming winter. When a host of smaller animals were born in the following spring, larger predators also increased their numbers. For a time, the predator-prey cycle builds before it falls. In 1895, members of Citizen Potawatomi Nation survived losses from starvation during the following winter. For the Elders, the gifts from the hickory pecan trees continued to give into the following years through the variety of animals to put on their tables.

Reread Mark 10:17-31. What is God calling us to be and do?

Consider the changes in relationships which happens when partners, children, extended family members, land, waters, trees, plants, and animals are considered to be gifts from Creator and Great Spirit to be honoured as being sources of knowledge key to our own survival and the survival of creation. What would these gifts teach us on our respective journeys in bringing life and light into the world?