

As you may have noticed in the bulletin, the title for the sermon is *Falling Upward*. It is taken from a book by theologian Richard Rohr.¹ I think it can shed some light on key dynamics at play in the conversation between Jesus and rich man (as well as the disciples) from our Gospel story for today. Perhaps you found yourself stumbling over the title. Why “falling upward?” The last time I managed a spectacular face plant, my trajectory was definitely downward. How about yours? Think of that business venture that came crashing down or how you felt when your marriage ended etc. It all might feel like one long downward tumble along with a large serving of losing control.

In contrast, moving upward is often associated with success. We climb up the corporate ladder so we can move upward in social status. Many of you have come to enjoy the rich cultural and natural life after gaining relative success for your family in various professional arenas. Many of us have “made it” by some social standard. Perhaps, this is not true for all of us, certainly not for many people in Maine and beyond who are struggling to survive.

Spiritual growth has often been compared with climbing UP a kind of ladder to God. So many Christians, even the most fervent proponents of grace (yes, Protestants included), are somehow still existentially hounded by the feeling that they have to do or be something in order for God to love them. This belief is undergirded by an image of God as still being fundamentally separate from us, dwelling out there somewhere in a place we call heaven where we might go some day after our death, **if** God agrees to take us in after a long steep climb. Let me ask you: What is your image of God? How do you relate to God and God to you? Where and how is God is to be found? What do you believe in your heart of hearts?

When Richard Rohr talks about “falling upward,” he is not talking about attaining anything. Rather, I think he is suggesting that we fall into a deeper connection with God, ourselves and others that is always and already there. Whether we tune into it is another question. We can experience this connection when we get caught up in wonder and awe. However, as Rohr suggests, more often than not our journey may actually **require** something of a proverbial spiritual face plant (my words) of the ego before we learn to live into greater maturity and peace. As our story will reveal, this is first a path

¹ Rohr, Richard, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011).

of descent rather than ascent though Rohr would also assert that we will be **lifted up** or resurrected but perhaps not in the ways we might imagine. We are talking about a necessary development in our spiritual journey from living the tasks of what Rohr calls the first half of life to those of the second half of life and eventual elderhood. The shift is not necessarily tied to chronology though it often first manifests between the ages of 35-55. Now let us take a closer look at the text.

Speaking of journeys, Jesus is about to go on a journey in our story when this very sincere man runs up to him and FALLS on his knees. He asks, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? (Mark 10:17).” As the story will reveal, he is a man with many possessions. Interestingly, he is choosing the language of inheriting which implies that he will receive something from another. However, he is asking what he must DO, assuming that there is something in his power to make himself worthy or unworthy to receive this desirable gift of eternal life – whatever that might actually mean.

Notice how Jesus responds by referring him to the commandments and naming many of them. He is reminding the man of what he was taught even at a young age as part of the task of the first half of life. Rohr refers to such teaching as the necessary developmental process that the ego must undergo to build a kind of “container” for itself. We learn what is expected of us if we are to belong to our cultural and religious group. At their best, the commandments are helpful guides for preventing suffering for the individual and the community. They are guideposts, set boundaries, give direction. While we want to help our children develop their unique gifts and talents, we also teach them to our children so that they can tell “right” from “wrong,” and find their place in the community.

Sadly, there is always the danger then of getting stuck in binary or dualistic thinking. We tend to start out this way. If we only do the “right” thing, have the “right” knowledge, dress the “right” way, belong to the “right” club, get into the right college, work hard enough, have enough money, win the song context, etc., we will somehow be OK and protected from suffering. During Jesus’ time, many people believed that doing well economically was, in fact, a direct confirmation that God was blessing them. By analogy, those who were suffering or struggling were thought to be receiving punishment from God. That was easy! I think we are still tempted to think this way. It appears that we tend to long for a declarative answer or explanation of the way we experience our lives. However, as the great

psychologist and mystic Carl Gustav Jung once put it,² the harder task is to accept that there are elements of experience that cannot be explained or solved but only outgrown (or lived into and through – as part of the second half of life).

The man in our story is in a place on his journey where he has learned to establish that container for the ego for his first half of life. He responds to Jesus by saying: “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” The man has placed himself within that container of his culture and religion and apparently feels confident about doing the right thing. Nevertheless, it appears that he is still looking for what some have humorously called “celestial fire insurance” when he asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. He does not begin to imagine it as a reality that could reshape his life now.

It is at the point of affirming his own efforts, that Jesus proceeds to pull the rug out from under him. Lest we think that Jesus is some mean bully, the Gospel explicitly says: “Jesus, looking at him, **loved him...** (Mark 10:21a).” Jesus loves this man in his struggle and knows that he cannot protect him from that spiritual face plant. The man has yet to learn that he cannot base his identity, joy or belonging on his own accomplishments or individual salvation projects, as Thomas Merton liked to call them. So Jesus goes on to say, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me (Mark 10:21b).” It is clear that Jesus has hit not only on a material but also a spiritual nerve in terms of how and where this man was rooting his deepest identity and sense of well-being. The text tells us that the man “was shocked and went away grieving for he had many possessions (Mark 10:22).”

It appears that this story uncovers wealth and a sense of righteousness based on our own doings as particularly difficult obstacles to living in harmony and love with God, ourselves, and others. In fact, Jesus uses the stark image that it is easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than a rich person to enter the kingdom.³ Ouch! I imagine many of us are thinking that the answer to the world’s problems cannot simply be that we all sell what we have and give it to the poor. Sure, life is indeed not that easy, though we would do well to dare to look at and address how our common life makes it easier for some to do well than for others. I don’t think that we can talk our way out of recognizing

² “The greatest and most important problems of life are fundamentally unsolvable. They can never be solved, but only outgrown.” Quoted in *Falling Upward*, iv.

³ Medieval legend suggested that there was a tiny gate leading into the city of Jerusalem and that a camel could not get through without being unburdened of its load and proceeding on its “knees,” so to speak. No such gate has been substantiated. Some manuscripts show evidence of changing camel to rope because the Greek words only differ in one letter (*kamelos* vs. *kamilos*). See Craddock and Boring *The People’s New Testament Commentary*.

that money has a particularly strong capacity to pull us away from the shores of God's grace and unconditional love and create division in our community. Of course, it also has great potential when it is well used and not tied to the suffering of others.

Having said that, I also believe that Jesus would probably have some challenging message for each of us, even if we are not wealthy. We all have to face that whatever we lean on as a crutch to make us feel worthy, important, and to secure our well-being over against others, will still leave us stumbling. Perhaps even Peter and the disciples remain more invested in hoping to "make it big with Jesus" than they have been willing to admit. As if hoping to confirm that their sacrifices will not go unrewarded or to check in if that sacrifice has been enough, he reminds Jesus how much they have all given up to follow him.

Jesus does assure him that they will all receive manifold. However, Jesus does not name individual riches – that extra summer home in the mountains or by the shore somewhere. Jesus names the gift of Christian community that expands our sense of family and exponentially increases our sibling count as well as the places we can call home. Notice that Jesus (or the writer) also sticks in the word "persecution" among the "rewards" the disciples can expect. Nobody bargained for that but Jesus keeps reminding them that their work and vision is not about business as usual. They are to offer healing, restoration, dignity, belonging – outside the bounds of what is deemed acceptable and conventional. They will suffer for it, Jesus says, but they will also begin to taste eternal life. I believe this is not only in an age to come but in the here and now.

As next week's text will make apparent again, theirs is a journey of maturation into the tasks of the second half of life, of spiritual elderhood. And I am going to be mean and say that you will just have to come back to hear more about it if you are feeling some tug and pull in your heart. In the meantime, I invite you to wrestle with the quote by Merton on the bulletin cover. What might be meant by the small or false self that we too often identify with but that is ultimately not known to God? Do you recognize aspects in your own life where you are not living fully connected to who you actually are beyond what you do? Are there aspects of your life where you are conforming in a way that distorts your deeper values and calling? Merton seems to be saying that God will not be deceived and cannot wait to have us grow. The good news is that God loves us in the infinite preciousness of our own confusion and failing (as my teacher Jim Finley like to say). So let us not be afraid of facing our own spiritual face plants. God can handle them! Thanks be to God.

