

heard Mark slip in that word “with persecutions” right? But giving things away or giving them up does not result in having less. It results in having more connections, more friendships that are founded in meaningful things, more people with whom you can share the joys and sorrows of life. It results in people who seek to share with each other and give to those who have need. It results in being part of a group where everyone is seeking to trust in God together. And to trust in God more than money, more than our broken worldly systems, and far more than themselves alone.

To those touched by Casey’s gift, they must have originally felt they would never get out from under that debt. But Jesus said, for God, all things are possible. We must be clear that God did not cause or condone Casey’s death. God absolutely wept over it. And still, out of her death, God worked to create possibility for freedom, connection, and wholeness for thousands upon thousands of people. The kind of giving she invited led to a new kind of life.

Jesus does get us. He knows what it is to be human. He knows our belovedness. He also knows our pride and how tempted we are to put all our trust in ourselves, what we can earn, and what we have. Today, and each day we live in faith, we begin to get Jesus, a little more. And we try to turn our lives more and more toward following his path. By giving more than we expect. And in receiving from God much more than we thought possible.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



February 18, 2024
First Sunday of Lent
“Give More than You Expect”
Rev. Emma Nickel
Scripture: Mark 10:17-31

Maybe you saw those Super Bowl ads last week that seemed to be advertising, well, Jesus. There were lots of things to like about them—a focus on loving neighbors, washing the feet of others, a wide invitation for anyone to explore faith. I also teach my kids to be skeptical about *any* kind of advertising we see. The funding for these ads comes in part from the founders of Hobby Lobby, which is a company with a very specific religious and political angle. I also know that their particular organization has a church referral system where people can seek out a church in their community. And they seem to be as happy to refer people to mainline Protestant churches led by women, as evangelical churches that prevent some folks from being in leadership. You can take all that for what it’s worth. The theme of the ads was *He Gets Us*. Meaning, Jesus understands us. Which is absolutely true. The incarnation is all about God becoming human and indeed fully understanding all that humanity suffers and enjoys. This season of Lent, though, invites us to press a bit more on the other end of the equation: *us understanding Jesus*. Seeking to know what it means to follow him, and working up the courage to do it. Especially when he asks more of us than we expect. Really *getting* Jesus and being his disciple is a high calling indeed.

In today’s reading, Jesus asked a rich man to give far more than he expected. The man was bold enough to declare that he had already kept the commandments and followed God in his life. So he was surprised and stricken when Jesus asked something more of him. He was told to sell all he had and give the proceeds to the poor. And then, to come and follow Jesus. This seemed like too high of a calling for the man to accept. He was shocked and he grieved, most likely because he didn’t want to give up all his stuff.

Unless we were to move into a monastic community, it doesn’t really feel possible for us to follow this provision to the letter. Who would we

1 Manuela Lopez Restrepo, “Before dying she made a fund to cancel others’ medical debt—nearly \$70M worth,” NPR, November 27, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/11/27/1215420434/medical-debt-insurance-ovarian-cancer-casey-mcintyre>

be burdening if we sold all we had and gave away all our money? Where would we go and how would we live? We live in a society, a world really, that doesn't allow for this kind of radical action. There is no safety net, no collective understanding of how we might live together, supporting each other and ensuring everyone has enough. And so it feels impossible to do exactly as Jesus asked.

But there are elements of this story that we can and must take seriously. The idea that stuff—wealth—encumbers us and has the potential to get in the way of following Jesus. The concern for the poor. And the sense that following Jesus does indeed require giving all of yourself. I'm not sure any of these ideas are easier than "simply" selling all our stuff. But they may at least give us a fresh way to think about it.

In life and in death, Casey McIntyre lived out these ideas from this passage. Casey was a wife, mother, and publisher at Penguin Random House.¹ She was diagnosed with ovarian cancer when she was 34 years old. Her diagnosis was the unimaginably horrible blow it is for anyone who receives it. Casey was lucky enough to have stellar health insurance, and so her family was not saddled with thousands of dollars of medical debt, despite her years of treatment. She and her husband Andrew realized what a ridiculous blessing they had, in a world where four in 10 American households are carrying some kind of medical debt. Casey knew that, too soon, she was going to die. And she wanted her legacy to be a blessing to others. She especially wanted to help those who struggle and are made poor by the kind of medical debt she narrowly avoided.

In planning for the inevitable losing of her life, Casey wanted to help others regain theirs. Casey and her husband Andrew agreed that they would eventually mark her passing with a debt jubilee. Jubilee is a Biblical concept. It means the wide forgiveness of debt, a setting free of those who have been bound. They worked with the nonprofit RIP Medical Debt to create a fund that would operate in her memory. RIP buys up a whole bunch of debt at once, which then allows them to pay it off at a fraction of the original cost. They do this just like any debt collection agency; but instead of trying to profit off the debt, they simply notify people that their debt has been cleared for them. For every dollar RIP receives, they can wipe out \$100 of debt. Casey had been inspired to partner to make this her legacy by watching a Moravian Church in Winston-Salem, North Carolina wipe out all the medical debt in their entire county.

After she died, Andrew posted the words Casey had prepared on her Twitter account: "If you're reading this I have passed away. I am so sorry...I loved each and every one of you with my whole heart, and I promise you, I

knew how deeply I was loved. To celebrate my life, I've arranged to buy up others' medical debt and then destroy the debt. I am so lucky to have had access to the best medical care. And I am keenly aware that so many in our country don't have access to good care."

The campaign in Casey's memory was fruitful beyond any one's imagining. It raised nearly \$1.1 million, which means it will eliminate debt in that amount, one hundredfold. As Andrew tells it, "We set this up as a national campaign. [Then we asked,] Would it be possible to maybe shift it to [just relieve debt in] New York City? Because Casey was such a consummate New Yorker. And [the folks at RIP] said, "Andrew, this is too much medical debt for New York City [alone] for us to buy. We have to do a bigger area."

Think of the impact of that. Think of people, struggling or made poor by those debts—some small, some massive. Think of how Casey gave her whole life, not by choice, but by the ugly, cruel fate of cancer. But in giving everything, she saved so many others. Those who loved her, and people simply inspired by her gave and gave. More than anyone expected. And a little piece of the world was made whole through it. Or, a good-sized piece really, bigger even than New York City.

Jesus is clear that following him while having a lot, or even a reasonable amount, of wealth, is difficult. Not because of the money itself, but because we often begin to put our trust in the security of the wealth, instead of in the grace of God. The pull of that idol of wealth is so strong, the only antidote seems to be to give it away, in the way Casey invited people to do. To share what we have. To give more than we expect, so that we are not bound by the worry of having more or less, or enough or not enough. So that we are instead free to care for others, to rely on others' care for us, and to put our trust in the one who made us and sustains us.

In the scripture, Peter began to protest a little when he heard Jesus saying all this. Peter declared that he and his friends *had* given up far more than seemed reasonable. In fact they'd given up pretty much everything to follow Jesus. So they would be ok, in the end, right? Jesus promised that yes, they would certainly be among those to receive eternal life, which is always God's gift to give anyway, and not ours to earn. But Jesus also said life and faith are not just about a future far away, but about the now. Giving more than you expect results in something new in this life right now: especially, a wonderful kind of family. A hundredfold gift of people who become like siblings, parents, friends. A community where hierarchies are turned on their heads, where relationships are inclusive and more meaningful. That doesn't mean life in this community will be easy. You