

On my day off last week I was at my dad's farm near Albert Lea. I was there to help with the harvest, but in a different way. My sister and her family were visiting from Florida. She has a son in the sixth grade who loves running machinery. So my help was not so much me doing stuff. I was more riding along, supervising, and coaching my nephew who isn't quite experienced enough to run the tractor all by himself.

As I was sitting next to my nephew I couldn't help but remember when I was his age. That was when I was learning how to run machinery. I was seeing the tasks we were doing through his eyes. Some of those tasks are intimidating: Backing up to wagons. Pulling full wagons. Gears could grind. Stuff could break. There is an element of fear. Stuff could go wrong.

Not all fear is bad. Fear goes together with learning new things. Fear happens when you leave the safety of what is familiar to master the unknown. Life without fear would be a life without challenge. That would be pretty boring.

It is not uncommon for people to think that being a Christian is pretty boring. When was the last time you were afraid to be a Christian, a disciple of Jesus? Maybe never! But if that is your experience, then your experience would be different from the disciples we heard about in our Gospel reading. They were frightened by what Jesus said.

First of all, Jesus said, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God." It says that the disciples were amazed. Maybe another way to say what was going on is that they were saying to themselves, "What are you talking about Jesus?"

But Jesus did not back down. He went on: "Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." It says that the disciples were "exceedingly astonished." "What in the world are you talking about? How could you say something like that?"

The third time the disciples are spoken of as being astonished or afraid is at the end of the reading. As I read that, try to picture the scene in your mind's eye. It says, "And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid." Jesus is up ahead. Nobody's walking with him. The disciples slink along behind. They're afraid. They're afraid to be Jesus's disciples. New experiences are in store for them based on what Jesus said.

The challenge that Jesus says down for his disciples is not to cling to wealth. How does a person not cling to wealth? There's really only one way: You have to be willing to give it away. You have to be willing to give more and take less, or maybe even to give it out freely for no services rendered. That is a new experience. No one has to teach us to snatch and grab and horde. We've been doing that since we were toddlers. As we get older we are often trained by teachers and authorities that what's ours is ours, and we don't have to give anything to anybody, and the more that we can accumulate for ourselves the better. Therefore, in the pursuit of ever-increasing wealth, you should give as little as you possibly can, and take as much as you possibly can, and that is how the game is played. I suspect that none of you have been frightened by this philosophy that I have just laid out. It is utterly familiar.

What might be frightening—if you are willing to take Jesus seriously—is his statement: “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God.” And again, he says: “How hard it is for anyone to enter the kingdom of God.” This is new. I thought it was easy to enter the kingdom of God. I thought no change was necessary to enter the kingdom of God—the church word for that is “repent.” I didn’t know I had to change. I didn’t know that I had to repent to enter the kingdom of God.

Now, one way that you could take Jesus’s words is that he is slamming the door on all who have wealth: “Get out and stay out!” But there is another way that you can take Jesus’s words. You can see them as a challenge to grow up. We can’t stay babies forever. We can’t remain in our merely natural state where we are grabbing, snatching, and hoarding. If you want to remain like that you are basically saying that you would like to go to hell, because hell is the place where people go who practiced their whole lives to be masters of snatching, grabbing, and hoarding. The only problem is that you, also, would be snatched and grabbed, and you probably won’t like that.

If we are going to enter the kingdom of God we have to become different. We have to learn from our teacher and master, Jesus, the ways of love. This will be something new. We have to learn about giving, suffering and bearing the cross. We are all naturally afraid of suffering and pain, but Jesus and the Holy Spirit can teach us that the fear of suffering doesn’t have to control our lives. If we suffer, we know that we will be comforted. Even if we die in our pursuit of love, we know that we will be resurrected.

These are not childish teachings. These are very grow-up, Christian teachings that require courage. These are the teachings of the Kingdom of God that will prepare us for heaven instead of hell. Heaven is a place of love. God dwells there, and God is love. The love of heaven is so pure and rich that we can’t even begin to grasp it. Maybe we could try by saying that everyone in heaven loves so purely and richly that they would do anything for you. They would suffer the loss of everything for you. But they won’t have to. Because heaven is the place where all things have been made new. It is the place where, as Revelation 21 puts it: “death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

To arrive at the place where God dwells, where love dwells—what might a person give for that? Let’s say you have 100 million dollars. Is that what you are going to hold on to? It’s just a bunch of zeros in some Edward Jones account somewhere. You can’t even lie on it like the dragons of old who liked to sleep on their heaps of gold. You would rather have those zeros on a piece of paper than to be kind, to be generous, to be merciful? It’s a no-brainer which is better! That is not to say it isn’t a challenge—a change—which brings fear, but the challenge is worth it.

Suppose I said to my nephew: I know that you want to run the tractor, but just think of all the stuff that could go wrong! The steering could fail. You accidentally drive into the ditch. You could fall out the window and be crushed to death when the tractor rolls on top of you. Those are foul, ugly thoughts. They falsely inflate fears, which might cause someone to remain in immaturity, to remain in safety.

Jesus does not want his disciples to remain immature and without fruit. We all have to grow up. We all have to change. We all have to repent. We might be afraid, but let’s all agree that a boy learning how to run a tractor is a good thing. How much more, then, is a disciple of Jesus growing up in the love that

Jesus teaches a good thing? Jesus's teachings and Jesus's commands set us on an adventure, but that adventure is totally worth it.

And you do not go on that adventure alone. If you get rejected, Jesus accepts you. If you suffer, Jesus will comfort you. If you die, Jesus will resurrect you. Therefore, there is no reason why you should ever give in to your fears. You, understandably, might be afraid to give away wealth. The voice of fear might say: "What if I end up being miserable?" Your wealth enables you to do a lot of nice stuff for yourself.

Or take another command of Jesus's: You might be afraid to love your enemy. Enemies have been known to do some hurtful things. Don't be afraid. Jesus, your teacher and master, teaches good things, not bad things. You can't go wrong if you will take the risk of being obedient to him. But you can't know that goodness until you take the plunge.

But suppose you try to carry out Jesus's commands and you fail. What then? Should you wish that you had never tried in the first place? That's a loser's mentality. If you fail, then ask Jesus to forgive you. Then get right back up on that horse. It's inevitable that a person will get bucked off while learning to tame a horse. How can we expect that it should be easy to tame ourselves? Or what kind of ride might we have if we make up our mind to love our enemy? Who knows what might happen!

On these adventures it's almost certain that mistakes will be made. Gears will accidentally be grinded. My nephew, by the way, didn't grind the gears even once this past week. I was the one who accidentally grinded the gears—but don't tell dad. On second thought, maybe you can tell him. I think he would forgive me.

Right next to the forgiveness of sins, growing up in love as Christ's disciple and student is the best of things. It sets us on adventures already in this life, and those adventures will continue on into the next. Don't be ruled by your fears. Put your trust in Jesus. He will protect you. He will pick you up when you have fallen. He is your Lord and Savior.