

A Sermon for Dayspring

By Eric Howell

Falling and Breaking

Mark 10:17-31

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I've been thinking about two words that fit together in different ways depending on where you are in life. Fall and Break. Students this week are on Fall Break. I could go on a "back-in-my-day we didn't have fall break" rant, but why do that? Fall Break is nice even if it comes on August 62nd in the endless Texas summer.

Those two words "fall-break" when you're young fit quite nicely together. They offer a promise of a welcome interruption in the progression of life's daily responsibilities. Consider the same two words when you're much older, and it's not as nice; it's upsetting. When you're older, a persistent concern is to not fall and break a bone. Fall and break signify something very different when we are young than when we are old. Life changes like this, and we change with it, even how we hear a few simple words.

A man ran up and knelt before Jesus. Notice he didn't fall in front of Jesus and break something on the way down. This is a young man. He has a young man's energy, and he has a young man's question: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" We don't talk that way much anymore. We don't speak of eternal life as something we inherit—we might ask about 'getting saved' or 'becoming holy' or 'being righteous'—but he asks it as a question of inheritance, a gift that someone bequeaths at death to those left behind. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus doesn't seem concerned or impressed by the question: "You already know the answer," Jesus replied. "You know the commandments. You know what to do."

"Teacher, I've kept all these from my youth," the young man replied. Jesus then looked at him and *loved* him.

Did you notice that? Jesus looked at him and loved him.

To look at him in the old English King James version is to "behold." In the gospels, to behold is more than just to see, but to consider carefully what you are seeing—what the meaning of that thing you're seeing is--whether it's a lily of the field that God adorns in splendor, a bird of the air that God provides for, or a young man, desperate for affirmation, consolation, assurance of his worth, a young man striving to do the right thing and be the right person, earn God's favor and be successful in life. See him. Behold him, see him there. You might see yourself.

He represents the spirit of the young and earnest; he is someone whose whole world is about to be challenged. This young man is the one who every other kid's parents point to when they are exasperated and say, "Why can't you be more like him?" Maybe he was an A student, and if he was, he secretly wished that they'd given grades in Sunday school so he could get his A there, too. Now he's a little older, and things have turned out all right for him. He's made a little money and has some responsibility. He's living proof of the old

theology that if you are good, good things will happen to you. He has been good, and good things have happened to him. So, maybe, he calculates, if he can be better, even better things will happen.

But we change in life, or we do if we are maturing. Words come to have new meanings—words like future, friendships, love, and wealth. This is true as our bodies age—grow stronger and then grow frailer. It's true of our minds and our memories, wisdom and relationships, and our spirituality. Show me someone whose faith is the same when they are 35 as it was when they were 14, and you're seeing someone who is still a baby in their faith. Their faith hasn't grown or changed with their body or their mind. But it will, as surely as life brings changes, our faith, our spirituality is changed whether we're ready for it and embrace it—whether we are ready for it or whether it comes with the world crashing down on us. We change. This is a young man whose life is about to be changed one way or the other. Because you know what's coming next.

Indeed, as we hear in Hebrews, the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account. The one who beholds us.

Jesus beholds us. All of us--sees us better than we see ourselves in any mirror. He sees with truth the truth of ourselves. He sees the truth of ourselves, and as he does, he sees with the eyes of love. Jesus, looking at him, loved him. *Agape*, if you must know. *Agape*, the word for love, that means God's pure, total, penetrating, full love. Jesus beheld the man and loved the fullness of this man's being with the fullness of God's being. All I can say when that happens is watch out. If God loves you, you're probably in for it at some point.

We shouldn't be surprised by what comes next. Maybe we are a little surprised that Jesus would speak so frankly to the man about money and possessions. He doesn't talk to everyone like that, but he does here. What's not surprising is that he says just the thing that is going to challenge and change the person in front of him. You're going to be challenged, and that challenge will change you. The thing it usually changes is the things that are strengths, up until that point become weaknesses for growing from that point.

Our strengths get us just so far in life and then there comes a time when our strengths get in the way of our growth. After a certain point, we don't become stronger versions of our younger selves. We become new selves, or we become nothing at all. Jesus sympathizes, not just with our weaknesses, as it says in Hebrews. But Jesus sympathizes with our strengths, knowing they must be relinquished and poured out, even as he emptied himself. Jesus sympathizes with our strengths because he knows that our strengths are also our weaknesses. But his sympathy isn't always gentle. Sympathy for Jesus is truth-telling, and his help comes like a two-edged sword splitting one half of life from the next, what got us here from what must be transformed in us from the person we are today to the person we are growing into for tomorrow.

Some of you will recognize at this point, the Franciscan friar Richard Rohr, among others, who keenly observes this phenomenon in life. We come to a point—sometimes a sharp point and sometimes a long journey--when we fall, and we break, and then by grace, we begin again. As unpleasant as this sounds, Rohr describes something like this experience as the necessary path to a spirituality for the second half of life. The second half of life, which he describes as not strictly chronological but transformational as we move from a life that “survives successfully” to a life of soulful living. Such living begins, for most people, only when you realize that what you’ve built in the first half of life—your ego, your structures, your system for life- can only take you so far, and then it will hold you back.

It's a fascinating, penetrating observation. What got you here won't get you there. God loves you just as you are and loves you too much to let you stay that way. Watch out. Rohr describes it as falling upward. It may be falling upward, but that doesn't make it any less scary when the job must change, when the relationship is so rocky, when the ego comes crashing down, when the body falters, or mind starts to stumble, when the questions you now have outgrown the sure answers you once had. When the eyes of Jesus look at you and love you, watch out.

Jesus looked at the young man and loved him. And then, in sympathy for this person who has reached the end of the road his strengths can take him, pierced his being, soul from body, hope from expectation, the first half of his life from all that is to come. The love of God took the form of severe mercy: *take everything you've built and let it go*. Sell what you own; give the money to the poor. You will have treasure in heaven and come, follow me.

Jesus means “sell your possessions” straight up literally. This was serious business for this young man. Behind the literal meaning, in a way the 1st-century young man would have understood like a fish swims in water is that his possessions were the report card of divine favor. They were understood as sure and true and certain evidence in the world they lived in, that his life is good and that he is righteous. It's how you know. On the right track, we might say. An up-and-comer. Onward and upward. He knows Jesus is a teacher, but he is now encountering that the goodness Jesus teaches is a different path than the one he thought it would be. It's a downward path; it's an emptying. It will require of him divesting his 1st half of life to step through a wardrobe into a new Narnia, through the eye of a needle into a whole different world with a new way of being. Jesus says it's freedom. He's... not so sure.

Come, follow me. To the young man it feels like come, fall down, and break wide open.

All three synoptic gospels tell this story in all its glorious, excruciating detail. John's gospel doesn't tell this story, but John has an equivalent. John's equivalent is Jesus calling Lazarus from the tomb.

“Lazarus, come out of the tomb.”

“Young man, sell what you have gained and come, follow me.”

It's the same story.

Live again, begin your new life. Come into the light of life. Relinquish what you've been holding onto and gritting your teeth for. Let go of that thing inside you that's got you to this point, but is now keeping you from living and loving and being the person that Christ has calling you to be. What that thing is—can you let it go?

The young man could not, or not yet anyway. Even still, Jesus still loved him. That love didn't cease when the man went away grieving. I like to believe that in his grieving, God's grace was working, and his story wasn't over yet. It has to be true.

Into the life of every person Jesus encounters, and maybe into the life of every person, there is a fall and a break. There's a threshold to cross, and as is the case with these things, you can't see how you're going to make it on the unknown other side. Baptism represents this as a reminder that the one who dies to self, falls into the arms of the Lord and is raised again. "The genius of the Gospel," says Rohr, "was that it included the problem inside the solution. The falling became the standing. The stumbling became the finding. The dying became the rising. The raft became the shore (159)."

Behold Jesus, there inviting. There comes a moment—maybe it's already come for you or maybe it's ahead of you or maybe it's right now—there comes a moment to open your clenched fists and let that thing go—the thing that has assured you you're surviving successfully. Let it go and follow me. Fall, and I'll catch you. Break, and I'll bind you up. Come with me. Trust me. You will receive mercy for the way down and grace for the way up. You will begin again as if you're rising from the waters of baptism to walk in new life. As if you are bread breaking open as grace for the world to come.

Amen.