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Pentecost 23B
Peace, Seattle
October 14, 2018
Pentecost 23B
Mark 10:17-21

WICKED PROBLEMS

At a recent clergy retreat I was part of, I became acquainted with a term I hadn't known before—even though it's been around since design theorists Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber coined it in 1973. The term is WICKED PROBLEM.

A **wicked problem** is a problem that's difficult or even impossible to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and ever changing requirements which are often difficult to recognize. And because of the complex, interdependent nature of the forces involved, the effort to solve one part of a wicked problem may create or reveal other problems.[1]

The term "wicked" in this case isn't a moral judgment about good or evil, but an adjective describing how resistant the problem is any kind of resolution.

Most of the great social problems human beings face— global climate change, poverty, inequality, political instability, disease, famine—are wicked problems.

For problems like these there is no "fix." There is, instead, the need to marshal interdisciplinary attention to the problem from multiple fields and vantage points simultaneously—science, economics, technology, medicine, politics, faith—and to do so consistently, over a long time frame, with perseverance—in order to shift the trajectory of the status quo toward new, more desirable and lifegiving directions.[2]

In our first reading, the prophet Amos makes visible a wicked problem in the Northern Kingdom of Israel that the prosperous ruling class would rather remained invisible.

The safety net, the circle of protection for the vulnerable, which was woven into the very fabric of God's commandments, now had gaping holes torn in it. And instead of working to repair that net, the wealthy and powerful were taking advantage of its breaching, to the further detriment of the poor.

These prosperous, church-going beneficiaries of the status quo considered God to be their ally. But speaking through Amos, God calls their conviction a delusion:

> I HATE, I DESPISE YOUR FESTIVALS, I TAKE NO DELIGHT IN YOUR SOLEMN ASSEMBLIES. TAKE AWAY FROM ME THE NOISE OF YOUR SONGS; I WILL NOT LISTEN TO THE MELODY OF YOUR HARPS. BUT LET JUSTICE ROLL DOWN LIKE WATERS, AND RIGHTEOUSNESS LIKE AN EVER-FLOWING STREAM.[3]

In today's reading, Amos warns the top 1% about what will lies ahead:

> YOU HAVE BUILT HOUSES OF HEWN STONE, BUT YOU SHALL NOT LIVE IN THEM; YOU HAVE PLANTED PLEASANT VINEYARDS, BUT YOU SHALL NOT DRINK THEIR WINE.

The only way forward, says Amos, is to "seek good and not evil, that you may live; so that the LORD will be with you just as you have said."

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[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wicked_problem
[2] See the article by Katherine Cooper of the Network for Non-profit and Social Impact. https://nnsi.northwestern.edu/social-impact/nnsi-blogs/wicked-problems-what-are-they-and-why-are-they-of-interest-to-nnsi-researchers/
[3] Amos 5:21-24

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Prophets can shine the light on problems; can give us knowledge of what's not working, and they can tell us the direction we need to go. But there remains a huge gulf between WHAT we need to do and HOW we get there.

For the better part of the past two decades the City of Seattle and King County have been engaged with the non-profit and faith communities, and the business sector in an effort to solve the issue of homelessness.

Along the way millions of dollars have been spent and a number of technical solutions have been tried: more shelter space, lower cost housing, tent cities and Tiny House villages, sweeps of homeless camps, to name a few. Yet the problem is still with us. Solutions have been attempted and have failed, which has led at times to the various stakeholders pointing fingers at one another.

It's a wicked problem, and wicked problems resist all attempts at easy solutions, which is why the wealthy man we meet in our gospel today is in a quandary.

He approaches Jesus—sincere, I think, in his intentions—but looking for a technical solution to what he envisions to be a technical problem: how to obtain eternal life. To prepare himself for the exam he's read the commandments like a blueprint and checked off every box.

TEACHER, he asks Jesus, WHAT MORE IS THERE LEFT TO DO?
I'VE ASCENDED EVERY LADDER, JUMPED THROUGH EVERY HOOP. NOW WHAT?

JUST ONE THING MORE, Jesus tells him.
SELL WHAT YOU OWN, GIVE THE MONEY TO THE POOR, THEN COME FOLLOW ME.

It's the only story recorded in the gospels where a person is directly invited by Jesus to follow him, and he chooses instead to walk away—and the reason is money.

A friend once told me about a former prison chaplain who'd returned to parish ministry.

After speaking at a pastoral conference, a colleague had commented:
THAT JAIL MINISTRY YOU SERVED MUST HAVE BEEN QUITE A CHALLENGE COMPARED TO THE PARISH MINISTRY YOU'RE IN NOW.

To which the chaplain replied,
ACTUALLY THE OPPOSITE IS TRUE. IN PRISON MINISTRY THE NEEDS OF MY CONGREGATION WERE SO CLEAR AND EVIDENT. PARISH MINISTRY IS MUCH HARDER, BECAUSE THEY LACK FOR NOTHING.

There's a little detail in Mark's telling of this encounter between the rich man and Jesus, a detail not found in Matthew or Luke. It's sandwiched between the lines at the beginning of verse 21, and it makes all the difference. After the man asks Jesus the question, and before Jesus responds, we read these words: ***"Jesus, looking at him, loved him."***

The key to tackling the many wicked problems we face as human beings, problems that are difficult—even impossible to solve, is to hold fast to Jesus, to hold fast to relationship, to hold fast love.

When we trust his promise to be with us through the power of the Spirit, then new paths emerge in places that seemed for all the world like dead end walls. That's the story of the New Testament in a nutshell.

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Holding onto and trusting our relationship with Christ doesn't mean that solutions to our wicked problems will miraculously reveal themselves. But what it does mean is that our vision for finding the right direction to move will be clarified.

In this story, Jesus offers the man a relationship that could move him toward the true life he longs for. But all the man sees is what he stands to lose in that proposition. That's the deep sadness of this story— the loss of what might have been.

"Jesus, looking at him, loved him."

It's LOVE that grounds what Jesus asks of us! He loves us too deeply to leave us clinging to that which will not bring us life. He probes the edges of our limitations…and then calls us to step beyond them.

It is he who companions us all the way through life's alley, through the muddle and the muck, through the failure and the futility.

It is he who promises to build a bridge with us from WHAT to HOW if we only follow him.
He promises to accompany us through the wicked problems we face with a tenacious love that will not leave us orphaned along the way.

It's an impossible task, of course.
- Stepping beyond what we know to be true about ourselves and the world.
- Stepping beyond the safe harbors we've fashioned for our security.
- Stepping beyond our fears and our doubts, beyond whatever would block us from following him.

Yes, FOR HUMAN BEINGS, IT IS IMPOSSIBLE, THIS WICKED CONUNDRUM, BUT NOT FOR GOD.

Today Jesus looks upon us, as he looked upon the rich man, and *loving us*, he invites us unto a journey that begins with trusting him, stepping out, and letting go.

That journey begins right here at this table. And you're invited.

Jesus calls to us: COME FOLLOW ME. And now we must decide.
Is his invitation a burdensome command? Or is it a gracious promise?

Amen.