### “Able to Sympathize” Steve Finlan for The First Church, October 13, 2024

**Hebrews 4:13–16**

13Before God no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

14 Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. 15For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. 16Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace.

**Mark 10:17–22, 26–27**

17As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, asking “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 18Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 19You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” 20He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” 21Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor; you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” 22When he heard this he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. . .

26They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” 27Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

We had a memorable session after church last week, remembering our dear departed: Warren, June, Carol, Lois, Roberta, Dot, Greta, Barbara, and others. I remember talking to Warren about sports. I’m old enough to remember when each football player had both an offensive and a defensive position, and Warren himself played on both sides of the ball in high school. I am grateful to be part of this community where there is so much love.

What about our Scriptures today? They are hard-hitting. Hebrews says God can separate truth from falsehood, and read our intentions like a book. Nothing is hidden, but all is laid bare to his eyes. But that gaze is not heartless and severe. Jesus, he says, is our great high priest who passed through the heavens. And our high priest is able to sympathize with our weaknesses, Hebrews insists, since he was tested as we are, though he never failed those tests. God never found him lacking. He has Godlike perfection, yet he was a human who trudged across the earth as we do, and faced trials, as we do.

He shared our flesh and blood. Hebrews sees the suffering and testing of the human Jesus as part of his qualification for the high priesthood. Jesus is compassionate and deserving. This idea of a priestly Messiah occurs in only *one* New Testament work, Hebrews, but it is of primary importance for him. The author of Hebrews lives in a different world from ours. He thinks always about Jewish history and institutions. The priesthood and the temple—especially the *heavenly* temple—are vitally important to him. Obviously that’s a different world of symbols and meanings from the world *we* live in. We usually don’t think of a holy priesthood or a heavenly temple. But he resembles us in his basic desire for mercy and grace (4:16), and for a Savior who can genuinely sympathize with us. The one who leads the way to salvation has a good idea of what we’re being saved *from*.

Now we also have a gospel story, a familiar one, where a rich young man runs to Jesus and asks for salvation. This is where Jesus makes that remarkably humble statement “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone” (Mark 10:18). He goes on to say, in effect, you know the commandments, don’t murder, don’t steal, don’t lie, honor your father and mother. The young man says he has kept all these since his youth. Jesus discerns the man’s love of money and says, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor; you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (10:21). This shocks and grieves the wealthy young man. The problem is not his wealth, but his *love* of wealth, his attachment to it. Because of the reference to *following* Jesus, I think the young man might have been seeking to become not just a disciple but an evangelist who would follow Jesus in his travels. And Jesus undoubtedly made higher demands of those who would be evangelists, than of run-of-the-mill believers.

He didn’t ask average believers to give up their money and possessions. Those who were going to follow him around Galilee, Samaria, Pella, Decapolis, and Judaea needed to be unattached to worldly wealth, and they needed to be temporarily detached from their families, too. He had stricter requirements for the apostles and the seventy evangelists mentioned in Luke 10, who were to carry no purse and no bag, but to rely on the kindness of those who took them in during their travels (Luke 10:1, 4–5).

There’s not much commonality between these two readings. The common ground might be the commandments, briefly summarized by Jesus, and implied in the remark of Hebrews that he was tested as we are, but without sin. That implies that he obeyed all the commandments.

Jesus went further than mere obedience when he showed extraordinary compassion for the poor, the sad, the downcast. He also believed God could save the wealthy, since, for God, all things are possible. Even the strong attachment to wealth, which was a barrier to becoming a traveling evangelist, is probably something God can work around, catching many souls in his net. God’s compassion is broad. Even Islam has this as a slogan, beginning its chapters with this saying: “In the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful.” Would that these principles were dominant in Islamic theology, instead of the severe judgment and retaliation that often characterize their theology.

So I find another commonality between our Bible readings: the idea of Jesus’ compassion for those who endure struggle, poverty, and other difficulties that come with the material life. I would restate Hebrews’ principle thus: we do not have a Savior who is ignorant of our sufferings, but who lived a difficult and challenging material life himself, yet never lost faith. Our traditional formula about Jesus, that he was “fully human and fully divine,” is true, though we may sometimes underemphasize the “fully human” part of that statement.

So don’t feel all alone and crushed when things have you down. Know that Jesus understands rejection and pain, and that he is with you to strengthen you and to vindicate you in the end. Come to Jesus with your worries and your struggles, your hopes and ideals, and he will help you.