

Mark 10: 23-31
Creekside COB
September 23, 2007

“The Rewards of Belonging”

Membership has its privileges—at least that is what I was told when I received my Cabela’s Club Visa card. It’s more than just a credit card. With every purchase I earn points that can be redeemed for Cabela’s quality outdoor merchandise. When used for Cabela’s purchases, I earn triple points! I receive advance notice of special sales not available to catalog customers, and I can take advantage of special *members only* Internet promotional offers.

Membership has its privileges. You get to go to the front of the line. You are entitled to services not available to others. You belong to a select group that gets the rights, privileges, and perks pertaining thereunto.

It’s different on the other side of the membership divide. The experience was captured in a song from the 1970’s called “Signs.”

***Now hey you mister can’t you read?
You’ve got to have a shirt and tie to get a seat.
You can’t even watch, no you can’t eat,
you ain’t supposed to be here.”***

***And the sign said,
“You’ve got to have a membership card
To get inside.”***

Years ago, the comedian, Groucho Marx wanted a membership card to the Beverly Hills County Club, but he could not belong. He was Jewish, and the rules forbade the admission of Jews or any minority into the club. Responding to the rejection, Groucho

said, ***“I would never belong to any organization that would have me as a member.”***

Today we rejoice in the reception of new members into the life and ministry of our congregation. These new members of our family of faith will not get a membership card. They won't be entitled to special discounts. They won't be entitled to anything. Membership in the body of Christ isn't a gold medal engraved with the declaration; ***“I am now a better person than you.”*** Christians are not more moral, well behaved, well off, well heeled or blessed than others.

We are, however, more enlightened, and if not, we should be. We've been given something that changes everything. Nowhere in the Bible will you see anything about ***“finding yourself.”*** If that's what you are looking for, you can find it in the self-help section at Border's. The Bible discourages all attempts at finding you by looking only after you. Jesus followers don't use up their lives chasing their best interests. ***“Look not to your own interests,”*** Jesus said, ***“Instead, look out for the interests of others. Count others better than yourselves.”***

This was the mistake of a man who asked Jesus how to get into the Eternal Life Club. The conversation precedes today's gospel lesson. ***“Good Teacher, where do I get an application? How much is the initiation fee? What do I do to get in?”*** Jesus replied, ***“You know the commandments. Keep them.”*** Jesus was amazed when the man said. ***“I have kept them—every one of them.”***

This man was a high-achiever who had more in common with us than his contemporaries. The sociologist Robert Bellah wrote a book about American life called, *Habits of the Heart*. He said our lives are characterized by the desire to ***be the best and achieve the highest.*** Our energies go into making names for ourselves. The number of possessions is the measure of our worth. Individual fulfillment and bettering ourselves is what its about.

People who study such things say this thinking was foreign to people in biblical times. The question, ***“What must ‘I’ do to inherit eternal life?”*** would not register. Salvation was God's gift

to the community. They wouldn't understand our talk about "personal salvation." They would say, "Unless everyone is blessed, ain't no body blessed."

I'll bet the parents of the man talking with Jesus used to drive a car with a bumper sticker that said, "Our Child Is An Honor Student at Nazareth Elementary." He grew up doing everything asked of him. He achieved a lot in his lifetime, but wanted something more. "I've kept all the commandments. So now what do I have to do?" He probably thought that Jesus was going to congratulate him—pat him on the back for doing such a great job. *"You're one fine fellow you are."*

The text says Jesus loved the man. "You are soooo close. All you need is one thing to get in. Sell all your stuff. Give it to the poor. Follow me." Jesus knocked the wind out of him. His achievements and possessions were his reward. He was so close, but he couldn't relinquish his things. Eternal life cost too much.

Jesus said, "It's hard for the rich to get in." The disciples asked, "If he can't get in, who can?" Jesus replied, "Mortals can't pull it off, but with God, all things are possible." Peter said, "What about us? We've left everything to follow you." "It cost *US* a bundle. We left our homes, our families, our work, our security. The other guy didn't, but *WE* did." Peter didn't have to finish the thought. "Membership has its rewards. What's ours?"

You have wondered the same. What do I get for spending Sunday mornings in church? What do I get for reading the Bible? What's my return on the prayers I pray? Tell me again how blessed I'll be putting an offering envelope in the plate every week and helping pay down the church mortgage. What do I get when I make decisions based upon what Jesus would do? What happens when my faith leads me to take an unpopular stand and I am ostracized for it? Who is keeping track of my sacrifices so that at the final judgment Jesus he will pat me on the back and tell me how proud he is of everything I did?

What ARE the rewards of belonging to the Kingdom of God? Jesus said to Peter, “No one who sacrifices home or family or land for me and my Message will lose out. They’ll get it all back, multiplied many times in homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and land—but also in troubles. And then the bonus of Eternal Life (The Message).” I take this to mean that following Jesus puts us in a family like no other. He gives us the best brothers and sisters we can have. He gives us Moms, Dads and children.

Jesus gives you something more than yourself to focus upon. His way, his life, his loves grants you your freedom. You don’t have to make something spectacular of yourself. You don’t have to be an over-achiever or settle for nothing short of perfection. You don’t have to tweak your character to be more acceptable. You don’t have to be a slave to abiding by rules. You don’t have to be tethered to the things you think you need in order to be somebody. You can be spared from all of it by committing yourself to something many orders of magnitude greater than yourself. You become strong by becoming weak. You come in first by placing yourself last.

I heard about someone who had two paintings hung side by side in his home. One was of Jesus’ parable about the rich farmer who had a bumper crop. He decided to tear down all of his old barns build bigger ones. He said to his soul, “Soul, eat, drink and have a ball, for tomorrow you die.” The quote under the painting said, “The Failure That Looked Like Success.” The painting next to it was of Jesus dying on the cross—the crown of thorns; the nails in his hands, his friends absent, hiding in holes somewhere. The quote under it said, “The Success That Looked Like Failure.”

Belonging has its rewards, provided we understand the unexpected nature of belonging to Jesus. When we follow him, the definition of reward changes. What seems like a path leading to last place turns out to be the path to a quality of life and depth of caring relationships that can best be called “eternal.” Membership has its privileges.