

Cameron Barr
October 10, 2021

How Am I Doing?
Mark 10: 17-31

This American Life, the NPR radio show-podcast recently produced an episode on the theme of embarrassing stories, inviting listeners from all over to make submissions and sharing some of them on the air. The featured story came from a self-effacing young woman who attributed her modesty to her Methodist upbringing. She said that she very rarely felt embarrassed because going to church throughout her childhood had taught her never to assume that she was the center of attention. This, I learned from the show, is one of the key distinctions between feeling embarrassment and feeling shame. Scholars who study these powerful emotions explain that the feeling of shame is a solitary experience. We can feel ashamed when we are at home alone just as well as we can feel shame in the company of other people. But embarrassment always involves an audience. So this woman explained that she hasn't really felt a lot of embarrassment in her life because she belonged to a church community that taught her it would be vain to assume that other people are ever watching her so closely that she should be preoccupied with what they think of her. "This worldview, that others weren't judging her, helped her not to judge herself. Those thoughts just didn't occur to her," explained the show producer. Now - I'm not sure that I actually believe she was as impervious to embarrassment as she says on the show. And I wonder if a church that's so good at protecting its members against feeling public embarrassment is also good at protecting its members from feeling private shame. But it occurred to me that there is something virtuous in what she described. We are so conscious of ourselves - preoccupied, even, with how we look to others and how we are perceived by others. It may be that to love God is to become a little less conscious of ourselves and a little more conscious of others. In other words, going to church is one place where we are taught - it's not about you!

That's the lesson the rich man in today's Gospel is struggling to learn. I have kept your commandments, the man says. I have followed the law. I am the best example of a good Jewish boy you'll find in this town. What more must I do, he asks? To this man, perfect compliance with

the law is evidence of his righteousness. He sees his achievements as signs of his faithfulness. He interprets his wealth as a testament to his worthiness before God. He's doing all the right things and he knows it's working because the results are in the measurements that matter to him. All the numbers are trending in the right direction, so he struggles to internalize the backward logic of the Gospel. There is nothing apparently unfaithful or unrighteous about this man. His only problem is that he's living his life with his self at the center of his story. His question to Jesus - What more must I do to inherit eternal life - turns on his actions, his abilities, and his salvation. The remedy that Jesus prescribes - sell what you own and give the proceeds to the poor - nudges the man from the private consideration of his own merits to the needs and concerns of others. Jesus tells the man to reorder his life so that the love of God and neighbor is at the center of his heart and soul. That means he needs to unload what is taking up that space. Some say that this story is all about the man and his money, that he could not conceive of living in the poverty that Jesus demands. But I'm not so certain that the man is merely stingy and corrupted by his wealth. Mark says that he walked away "shocked" and "grieving." Not because Jesus took his money but because Jesus shattered his worldview. Jesus told him, "It's not about you!" What do you mean that the metrics of my success do not matter in the Kingdom of Heaven? What do you mean God's faithfulness is beyond my power to control? You mean to tell me that my salvation is not a private matter of my heart but a public concern of the common good? To love God is to put God at the center of your story. I don't judge the man in this story; I have compassion for him because I struggle in similar ways to move myself out of the center of my life.

It turns out that the self-effacing Methodist woman on *This American Life* did have an embarrassing story to tell. I won't share all the details because I think it's relatable enough to most people - it certainly made me cringe. The story took place at a banquet, which is the scene of some of Jesus's most withering social commentary. The problem with banquets is that our motives are often so mixed even when we've gathered for a good cause. I'm remembering all the banquets I've attended because some important person offered me a seat at their table. I used to go to Human Rights Campaign dinners in Nashville with my friends at Vanderbilt Law School. Because of my position as pastor, I would sit at the president's table at banquets with Grinnell College faculty. One of the first things I was asked to do when I came to Chapel Hill was go to the local NAACP banquet. These were all places where I wanted to be seen. These were all causes that I wanted to be known for supporting. In some cases, I didn't even really want to go to

the banquet - but I wanted the people there to want me to come. Attending these banquets reassured me that I'm a good person, and gave me comfort in the company of people I wanted to know me. I also loved the cash bar. And it makes me wince to think about how many banquets I've attended where I spent more at the bar than I gave when they passed the hat at the end. Fortunately, the Methodist lady has an even more embarrassing banquet story than I do.

She was invited to the banquet as part of an interview for a job that she had applied for. For most of the dinner, she felt very uncomfortable at the table and she didn't feel secure in the contributions she had been able to make to the conversation. She was there to promote herself and to present herself as someone these people would want to work with. When it came time for the auction at the end, she thought she would assert herself by participating early on in the bidding. She didn't have the money to buy anything in the auction, but she wanted to be a member of the group and reasoned that she would quickly be outbid by the people who actually came prepared to buy. The auction opened at \$25,000. She didn't have the money and come to think of it, she didn't know exactly what she was bidding on, but she raised her paddle enthusiastically. Her name flashes up onto the board at the center of the room, but rather than raising the bid the auctioneer asks for more people to step up at \$25,000. That's when she realizes she's not at an auction. She's just made a pledge, and no one is coming to outbid her. How embarrassing!

The woman tells the show producer that the embarrassment didn't really set in until they all sat at their tables and watched a video about the cause the banquet had been called to support. And she realized that the focus of her attention had been on all the wrong things. She'd spent the evening with herself at the center of her story - though hardly more than I have on similar social occasions.

Here we have a faithful man with more money than imagination. Here we have a modest woman who can't pay her pledge. And here am I. Aren't we all listening for God who says to all of us in the way we need to hear - Get out of the way. This story is not about you!