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First Presbyterian Church
October 10, 2021
Mark 10:17-31

“The Eye of the Needle”

Mark is not my favorite gospel, and when I hear passages like this one I know darn well why. Sell everything I have and give the proceeds to the poor? Now how am I supposed to do that? I have a family to think about; 2 college education bills to pay – I don’t want my children to be without an education! I have a mortgage – I don’t want my family to be homeless! I have groceries to buy and necessities in life and a car that needs gas to get me to and from work.

Sell everything and give all the proceeds to the poor? Now how is that going to help me or others when I and my dependents become yet more dependents wandering the streets?

I’ll state my disclaimer up front and admit that today’s story is, for me, the most difficult of Jesus’ stories, because I know I cannot live up to his command. I could not give up everything I have, nor could I leave my family behind. If the latter had been a precondition of ministry, I would have chosen a different profession. Having a family has always been important to me. I don’t do well alone. The one time in my life that I had the chance to live alone, I went and got a dog. So when I read this story from Mark about selling everything and leaving it all behind, I just know that Jesus is talking to me and I too would walk away shocked and grieving.

“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Who is this man, and why is he asking this question? It reminds me of when Terry and I dropped off our oldest son at college for his freshman year and his room had carpet. How in the world do they vacuum it, I asked? To which Terry quipped, “Don’t ask questions you don’t want answers to.” Why is this man asking a question of which we don’t want to hear the answer? I do not like this man. I see him as a person who is used to getting what he wants, so it would

never occur to him that he's asking a question that might leave him grieving.

When he approaches Jesus, they're outside – which means it's difficult for the disciples to serve as bouncers for all the wanna-bes. And he kneels in front of Jesus, which means he gives Jesus little choice as to whether to listen to him or not. He will be heard. I know men like this; I know some women like this. They don't fully understand the depth of their privilege, but they sure know how to use it to their advantage.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life,” he asks. It's a somewhat selfish question. Unlike other people who approach Jesus on the street, he's not interested in being rescued from demons or saving a child or stopping a constant flow of blood. He's rich and healthy and self-confident. He's got money in the bank, and he wants to make sure that he's got a reservation for that great vault in the sky. He's entirely interested in himself.

But I'll give credit where credit is due. Self-interest is not an entirely bad thing. We cannot take care of others unless we take care of ourselves. You know, that whole put on your oxygen mask first before helping others. We do need to advocate for ourselves. If we're suffering, we need to ask for help alleviating our suffering. If we're mourning, we need to ask for comfort and time. If we're impoverished, we need to ask for assistance. But if we're healthy and wealthy, we also need to be wise.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life,” the man asks. “You know the commandments,” Jesus says. And starts listing them off: you shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; do not defraud; honor your father and mother.

Wait, what? Do not defraud? That's not a commandment! You shall not covet is a commandment, but defraud is not the same as covet. Covet is an attitude; defraud is an action. The shift is so notable that Matthew and Luke leave it out of their stories. So why defraud? Perhaps Jesus knew something about the man and how his riches were earned. After all, from the Torah to the Prophets to wisdom literature, defrauding in the Bible is always connected with the rich exploiting the poor.

But I digress . . .

“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” What the man was asking was not atypical in Jesus’ day, nor in our day, either. What must we do, we want to know? Even among we Protestants who shun works righteousness, who whole heartedly believe in grace alone and that one cannot work for one’s salvation, there’s still a tendency to believe that there must be something we need to do. In a way, we sort of look upon the 10 Commandments as a type of self-improvement plan because naturally if we follow them or Jesus’ other teachings, we will be better people and therefore, we will be saved.

But the problem with this line of thinking, and the man’s question, is that there really is nothing we can do to inherit something. An inheritance, by its very definition, is something we can only receive if a person chooses to give it to us.

What the young man failed to grasp . . . what some people of privilege fail to grasp . . . is that he didn’t need to do anything. One doesn’t need to *do anything* to inherit eternal life because it’s something that can only be given. But to receive it, we have to have our hands free, which means we need to let go of the things to which we cling so very tightly. Money holds our questioner back from a full commitment to Jesus. But for others, the stumbling blocks may be fame or power, or beauty or ego or jealousy. What are the things that get between you and God? It could be money; but it could be something else.

“Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

How ironic it is that Jesus addresses the man’s feeling of lack – because obviously he feels he’s lacking something otherwise why would he have stopped Jesus? How ironic that he addresses the man’s feeling of lack by increasing his lack: sell what you own, and give the proceeds to the poor. Well, it’s one thing to feel a gap in one’s heart and soul; but it’s something else to experience a gap in the wallet and bank account. So the man walks

away shocked – shocked – that this is the answer Jesus gives. As the old saying goes, be careful what you ask for.

As far as I know, this is the only story in the Gospels where Jesus invites a person to discipleship and they turn it down. “He went away grieving”; he turned his back on Jesus because of one thing: money. “For he had many possessions,” Mark tells us.

Now the story could have ended right there with Jesus hoping the man would eventually renounce his wealth and come serve God. But the story goes on.

“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” Jesus told the disciples this after the young man left. And Jesus tells that to us, too -- we who are hearing these words 2000 years later. “For God all things are possible.”

Sometimes we have a hard time believing that; maybe this is why the story makes us so nervous . . .

As someone once said, “. . . there is no story in the entire Bible more frightening than this one, because I don’t want to be that man. I don’t want to be the person who misses out on God’s kingdom because I can’t let go.”

Do you want to be that man?

Jesus’ requirements for discipleship are not easy. They require a total commitment on our part. Following him means removing the stumbling blocks that are in our way, no matter how heavy or cumbersome they may be, or how unwilling we are to let them go. But the only way we can step into the future God has planned is to let go. And yes, that’s scary. Because we can’t predict and we can’t manage the future. But when have we ever been able to predict the future?

Friends our lives are sacred journeys into which God speaks and acts. And sometimes, that journey takes us into uncertainty. And there, if we're willing to let go and let God, so to speak, we can with God's help discover the life God calls us to embrace. Because with God, "all things are possible."

And here's more good news. Jesus looked upon the rich man and loved him. The rich man is the only person, in all of Mark's gospel, who is singled out as loved by Jesus.

The only one.

This is a beautiful note, because it shows us that failure to give wholeheartedly does not make one less worthy of love. But it's also a sign of tough love because it reminds us that love demands and requires something of us.

Friends, on this day we dedicate our stewardship pledges, it's worth remembering that Christian stewardship is not about how much we give, but how much we keep, and why.

One day a rich man came to Jesus and sought his counsel. Jesus presented him with a choice. That same choice comes to us in some form almost every day. Most every day, "[t]here comes a moment in some very practical and unexpected way when a choice is before us, and without realizing it something of our soul, our character, our being is at stake – you might even say the kingdom of heaven is at stake – and we have to decide, yes or no."

Go, said Jesus. Sell. Give. Come. Follow.

Amen.

Sources:

- The Difficult Words of Jesus, Amy-Jill Levine, Abingdon Press, 2021

- Jon Walton, a sermon given at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Wilmington, Delaware, October 9, 1994.