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First Presbyterian Church
October 13, 2024
Mark 10:17-31

Loving God, as we gather before You today, we open our hearts to Your word. Speak to us through this story of the rich young man, And help us to see the ways we hold on too tightly to the things of this world. Give us the courage to release what we do not need, And to trust that You hold our futures with love and grace. May Your Spirit guide us as we seek to follow Jesus more closely, With hearts that are open and hands that are free. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

“The Rich Young Ruler”

Mark is not my favorite gospel, and when I hear passages like this one I know darn well why. Like the rich man in our story, I too would walk away grieving if Jesus were to look in me in the eye and tell me to sell everything I have and give the proceeds to the poor. And it's not the part about giving the proceeds to the poor that saddens me; it's the part about parting with all my stuff that saddens me. I'm not proud of that, but I don't think I'm alone in feeling this way, either. I'm willing to sell some of my possessions, but all of them? That I can't do. After all, I have a family to think about; am I really expected to sell everything, including my home? Then what? Is this what is expected of me – and of you?

The story of the rich young man begins promisingly. He's obviously searching for something; otherwise, why would he go to Jesus? There must be something missing from his life. Mark also tells us that the young man not only approaches Jesus but runs to him. In other words, he knows Jesus has something to offer him and he seems more than ready to take it. He's also at a decided advantage because he knows what he really wants and needs. In asking Jesus, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” he admits that he needs something

more than what he already has in his life—and recognizes that Jesus may just hold the keys to that something more.

And, Jesus' initial response to the young man's inquiry is not all that surprising. He tells him that if he is seeking the path to life, the surest way to begin is by keeping the commandments. "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth," the young man says. He has lived a good and upright life, and keeping the commandments has brought him to the threshold of God, but there's something more that he needs to do: Jesus tells him he will find what his heart most desires if he sells everything he has and gives the money to the poor.

And the young man—along with anyone who hears this story—is stunned. Jesus says he will know fullness of life only by doing something that seems utterly reckless and wildly preposterous. He will find happiness by being stripped of his possessions? He will move more deeply into life with God by letting go—by forever loosening his hold on what he owns? That doesn't make any sense.

I don't know about you, but (again) part of why this story makes me so uncomfortable is because I would be sorrowful if I was told that I had to sell all of my stuff, too. My stuff brings me comfort and security; maybe your stuff brings you comfort and security, too. Or maybe you're afraid that if you didn't have your stuff, you wouldn't be so secure. Isn't this why we buy insurance?

A number of years ago the Lily Foundation did a study titled "Thinking Theologically about Wealth," which found that when Americans are asked if they have enough money, they respond by saying, "I need a little more" . . . regardless of their income level.

Which we could interpret to mean that we are materialists who are enslaved to the market dynamic of spend, accumulate, earn more, spend more, and accumulate more. But that's not what the study found. People weren't driven by consumerism, the researcher said, as much as they were driven by anxiety – the type of anxiety that they if

they part with their stuff, they're parting with their future that they've worked so hard to secure.

Maybe the man in our story suffers a similar affliction. He can't shake the strong hold of anxiety and fear and worries endlessly that if he parts with his possessions he's parting with his security, too. But he cannot let go, so instead of accepting Jesus' invitation, he "went away grieving."

The comment is telling because it suggests that the young man, after hearing Jesus' advice, doesn't weigh his options and then decide that returning to his wealth and possessions is the better choice. Indeed, there is absolutely no indication that he has found what he's looking for in his wealth, otherwise (again) why would he have come to Jesus in the first place? He clearly knows what Jesus says is true; why else would he grieve? He knows he is turning his back on the thing he most wants and needs. Fullness of life is standing right before him, but he can't let go of a lesser good for the sake of a much greater good. So his life will continue to be less than it could be.

Now we could get all judgmental with the man and declare that we would never walk away from Jesus if he were standing right in front of us and issued us an invitation. But again, I'm not so sure about that. I think part of what unsettles us so much about this story is not so much that we have to part with our stuff, but that we have to part with our stuff that brings us security which also means we're leaving our futures in someone else's hands. And that, my friends, is scary, because we will do almost anything to secure our futures. Again, isn't this why we all buy insurance?

You know, as I've watched the news about hurricanes Helene and Milton, I just keep thinking "what will all those people do who have lost their homes and don't have insurance?" (Which most of them don't have because it's so cost prohibitive or not offered.) What do you do when you lose everything? When your entire future is washed away in a storm? *None of us would want that for anyone. So if someone were to suggest we actually choose that path, as Jesus does to us today, we are stunned. Let go of everything and leave our futures in someone else's*

hands? Have you lost your mind? But friends, when do any of us ever know what the future holds?

I think in our rush to judgment with the young man, we dismiss how hard it is to take those first steps into a new future. But then again, maybe we rush to judgement because it's the demand to take those steps that really scares us.

I mean, just think about those scary first steps you've taken in life.

The new job, the big move, the marriage proposal, the new baby. The new school, the divorce, the resignation . . . such steps into the future are fraught with anxiety.

Any of us who have witnessed babies taking their first steps know they fumble and fall and are unsteady on their feet – first steps in life are like that. They can be difficult, and sometimes painful. Attending the first AA meeting, calling the marriage counselor, coming out; or leaving home . . . first steps are hard.

You know, people often say that when change occurs, we need courage to get through the difficult times. But what we really need is courage to let go; to let go of our need for certainty (which sometimes we think our stuff brings us, like the man thought his stuff did) and embrace uncertainty. For you see, renewal is only possible by going into and through transition, and transition always has at least as much to do with what we let go of, as it does with whatever we end up putting in its place.

The young man thinks he's built a solid foundation to secure his future. But Jesus tells him otherwise. "You lack one thing," he tells him. And what is that one thing? The belief that with God, anything is possible.

"With God, all things are possible," Jesus told the disciples after the young man left. And Jesus tells that to us, too-we who are hearing these words 2000 years later. "Nothing is impossible with God." You really

can leave your future in God's hands. Sometimes we have a hard time believing that; maybe this is why the story makes us 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. It requires a total transformation and commitment on our part. It means removing the stumbling blocks that are in our way, no matter how heavy or cumbersome they may be, so we can step into the future God has planned. And yes, that's scary. Because we can't predict and can't manage the future. But God can.

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.

And in that look of love Jesus had for the rich man, we are reminded that Jesus looks upon all of us, upon you, and loves you, too, and has great faith in you, because nothing is impossible for God.

Friends our lives are sacred journeys into which God speaks and comes. 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." We are not left alone to take those first steps. God can and will help us with them.

Amen.