

A sermon preached on October 21st, 2018 based upon Mark 10:17-31.

This story tends to be one that we are quick to dismiss. Either we say, "I'm not rich, so Jesus isn't talking to me." Or we say, "If Jesus is saying I should go sell my possessions and then give away all my money to the poor, well, that's just crazy. I'm not going to go become a homeless street person for Jesus."

But I don't think that is what Jesus intends for us, so let's try to engage this story. There are a couple of things to notice. After their initial conversation and before Jesus give the man the assignment, we hear this: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him..." (vs. 21) You might be surprised to know that with the exception of the "beloved disciple" in John's Gospel this is the only instance in which Jesus is said to "love" a specific person. Presumably Jesus loved countless people – indeed we could say that in some sense he loved everybody he met. But why does Mark make a point of telling us that Jesus loved this man? Presumably it is because Mark wants to make it clear regarding what Jesus is about to say that his intention isn't to make a spectacle out of him. Jesus says what he does out of love.

And then there is the reference to Jesus "looking" at the man. This is more than a matter of Jesus simply casting his sight in a particular direction. The implication is that Jesus truly sees the man and where he stands in relation to the Kingdom of God. He really knows this guy, better than the man knows himself. He has diagnosed the man's problem is about to prescribe his treatment.

There are cues in this story that Mark intends for us to understand that it is a "healing story." We are told the man "runs" to Jesus. The only other place somebody runs to Jesus is the man possessed with a legion of demons who Jesus sets free. We are told the rich man "kneels" before Jesus. Three times earlier in the Gospel we have heard of such behavior: with a Leper seeking healing from Jesus, by a ruler of the synagogue who has a dying daughter he wants Jesus to heal, and by the woman who touched the hem of Jesus' garment, receiving a healing of her affliction of the non-stop flow of her blood.

On some level of his being this man knows he is in need of healing. There is a hole in his soul. He has everything the world deems important: Money, respectability, and yet there is a profound emptiness within him. He comes to Jesus seeking a healing of his heart.

Immediately Jesus challenges the way in which the man addresses him. "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." We human beings are a mixture of good and evil; only God is purely good. And yet we routinely make a distinction between "good" and "bad" people. It's an unavoidable distinction, particularly for those of us who are parents. We want our kids to keep the company of "good" kids who won't lead them astray.

But on a deeper level this distinction we are so quick to make is very self-deceptive leading us to a prideful posture that overlook our own sins. Some of the worst evil is committed by respectable people to whom great power has come who lack the self awareness to question their judgments.

Immediately Jesus goes on to ask about the man about some of the ten commandments – specifically the last six which address specific objective behavior which primarily involve not doing certain things: Don't kill, don't steal, don't commit adultery, don't lie or defraud, don't dishonor your parents.

The man's response is, "I have kept these from my youth." Jesus doesn't question this, and we probably shouldn't either. It is possible that a young person could be brought up in such a way that they manage to avoid these "bad" behaviors. But if this were the case, there would be little reason for pride. It would only happen if a person grew up in a privileged context in which there would be little temptation to steal or lie or defraud because all his or her needs are provided for. It would require that the person to have grown up surrounded with plenty of positive examples of how to live a moral life. In other words, a life lived without ever breaking the last six commandments would have more to do with good fortune and communal support than with personal accomplishment.

It is interesting that Jesus doesn't ask the man about the first four commandments? These deal with our relationship to God and are harder to gauge from the outside. Take the second commandment for instance: "You will have no other gods before me." This is a commandment of which all of us are guilty of breaking. It's about idolatry. It asks the question in what do we place our ultimate trust? This man has made an idol of his wealth. Idolatry is another word for addiction. Some addictions are hard to hide because of the havoc they cause: Addiction to alcohol or drugs or gambling. Other additions can be more socially acceptable such as an addiction to money. In telling the man to go sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor Jesus is asking the man to go cold turkey in regard to his addiction.

So this could have been a healing story regarding the man's addiction to money as the place from which he seeks his sense of security in this world. In this case, it is a healing that requires some cooperation on the part of the man. Help is being offered; he has to be willing to receive the help.

What would have happened if the man had taken up Jesus on his offer? It would have thrown his sense of identity into disarray. Who is he without all his money? His money allowed him to feel like one of the "good" people, the "competent" people, superior to others. In those days (and to a lesser extent even today) to have a lot of money was commonly believed to be an indication that God had blessed you for your righteous living.

Without his money the man would be forced to search for a deeper identity: that he is a beloved child of God who is valued neither more or less than anybody else.

To accept Jesus' invitation would have placed the man in a profound state of vulnerability. Where before most of his problems could be solved simply by writing a check, now it would no longer be possible to be so self-reliant. He'd have to rely on the help of others.

Jesus prefaces his assignment to the man by saying, "You lack one thing" and yet we aren't actually told what that one thing is. I think what he lacks, and what perhaps to some degree we all lack is a deep trust in God. You can't actually learn what it means to trust God when your posture in life is one of self-reliant invulnerability.

I like the comparison here to learning how to swim. You can learn all there is to know about the mechanics of swimming standing on the side of the pool, but until you take the risk of jumping into the deep water and discover that without solid ground beneath your feet it truly is possible to float, you can't really say you know how to swim.

Similarly we can learn all there is to know about the Bible and Christian beliefs, but until we have experienced times when we really were in a state of vulnerability that required we learn to trust God, we can't really say we know much about what it is to have faith.

One of the striking things about the man in this story is how essentially alone he is. He doesn't seem particularly connected to the suffering of the poor. Note his original question to Jesus: "What must **I** do?" Contrast that to the prayer Jesus taught us to pray which is prayed consciously as a part of a community. "**Our** father... give us this day **our** bread... forgive **us our** sins... lead **us** not into temptation, but deliver **us** from evil..."

What we easily miss in the story is that Jesus is inviting the man into a new community. "Come follow me," he says which means join in the companionship of those who are trying to learn what it means to follow me. "You don't have to do this 'cold turkey' thing alone. We will be with you to support you. You won't starve. Giving up the luxury you've become accustomed to will be a challenge, but ultimately you will find the joy of being a part of a sacrificial community of love well worth it.

Unfortunately the man turns Jesus invitation down and goes away sorrowfully. The disciples are astonished regarding Jesus' words about how it is harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God than a camel to get through the eye of a needle. They have bought into the cultural assumption that rich people are blessed by God, and they got it that the man had managed to live a righteous life in terms of keeping those last six commandments.

The disciples who are far from perfect have made sacrifices to follow Jesus. They weren't rich like this man, so their sacrifice wasn't as great in terms of letting go of money and possessions. But they did leave jobs and they left family. There was a risk involved.

The man is being offered the same thing the disciples were offered: a new family. God's family. Oftentimes Christianity is presented as being primarily about reinforcing the families we were born into. There's a famous Christian radio program called "Focus on the Family." And yet the disciples in this passage are commended for leaving their families behind in order to follow Jesus.

Now don't get me wrong. Hopefully in following Jesus we will become better spouses and parents and children and brothers and sisters. But Jesus makes it quite clear that if push comes to shove and we are forced to choose between loyalty to the families we were born into and loyalty to God's family, we must choose the latter.

Note the original question of the rich man. "What must I do to **inherit** eternal life?" Think about that. There really isn't anything we can do to **inherit** something. Inheritance comes to us because we belong to a family and our parent dies. "Eternal life" isn't simply something that occurs at the end of this life; it refers also to a quality of living that can occur now as we live out of the reality of the Kingdom of God breaking even now into this world. If the man wants "eternal life" then what he needs is to be adopted into God's family through Christ. And that's exactly what Jesus is offering the man.

So in the end I think we can all identify with the man in this story because we too struggle with our idols and addictions that probably include to some extent money. We, too lack one thing, and that is a deeper trust in God. The spiritual journey involves moving from a scarcity mindset to an abundance mindset. The scarcity mindset sees the world as having a shortage of the good things we need to live and puts us in competition with one another to get these good things. A curious fact about the man in this story who has the most – the rich man – is that although he has the most abundance in terms of possession his view of life is rooted in a scarcity mindset. If he does what Jesus asks him to do he believes he will find himself dealing with a scarcity that will destroy him.

But Jesus invites us to see the world as being abundant with God's grace. Elsewhere Jesus says, "Be not anxious about what you will eat, or what you will wear, for your father knows you need all these things, but seek ye first the kingdom of God and all these things will be given to you." Consider the birds of the air who manage to find enough to eat.

So it's a journey we are, and invariably learning how to trust God will require we experience scary, hard times in which a feeling of scarcity will lead us wondering if we will make it out alive. Often abundance is recognized looking back in a way we miss it in the present moment looking at what seems like the enormity of our problems. It's the perspective we gain in the familiar third verse of "Amazing Grace."

*Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come;
twas grace that brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home.*

It is comforting to remember that the disciples were perpetually called out by Jesus for their lack of faith and their quickness to doubt and imagine the worst. This is the human nature we share with the disciples. But the New Testament tells us that in persisting on the journey, the faith of the disciples grew stronger. The journey is the same for us. In the midst of those "*dangers, toils and snares*" life brings us it may well be that we will be aware of more fear than faith arising up within us. But gradually, with each dark valley we emerge from we become more mindful of the unseen presence of abundant grace – of loving help that comes to us in a myriad of forms including the kindness of family, and church members and complete strangers.

And it is to such grace that we are called to witness.