October 14, 2018

Mark 10:17-31

Generosity

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Mark 10:17-31 New Revised Standard Version

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” 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.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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.” Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

You lack one thing. What could this man lack? He is nicknamed the rich young ruler, after all. He lacks nothing. He has everything. Jesus tells him to sell what he owns and give his money to the poor. It is so easy for us to hide behind Jesus’ words. We say that Jesus was talking to that guy, not to us. Or we finesse Jesus’ words. We say that Jesus doesn’t really mean for us to sell everything we have and give it to the poor, Jesus just wants us to be willing to do it. Or, Jesus doesn’t mean for us to do this because we have to take care of our family. I mean, if we were to sell everything we own and give the money to the poor, western civilization would collapse.[[1]](#footnote-1) Right?

We can think of so many other people who hold on to their wealth. Jesus wasn’t talking to us, because we don’t have enough. We wish we had more. Wealth was considered a sign of blessing in the first century and it still is today. We admire the rich and famous and think that their lives must be so much better than ours. We find in in our language as well. Have you ever thought about the term “working poor”? It seems to assume that the rest of the poor do not work. Or when we say someone is deserving. Does that mean that other people aren’t deserving?[[2]](#footnote-2)

We think that since we don’t have as much as the guy Jesus was talking to, that Jesus isn’t talking to us. But, Jesus is talking about money and what to do with it. Jesus wants us to know that wealth does something to us and that it isn’t all wonderful when you have more money than you know what to do with. Wealth can provide us with everything we need, but it can insulate us from the needs of others. Because when we have much, we tend to focus on ourselves and to forget about other people.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The rich young ruler is focused on himself. He asks Jesus, “What must *I* do to inherit eternal life?” He can’t see outside of himself to see how he can walk alongside others. He can’t comprehend how there can be abundance outside of the riches that he has stored up. Where do you see your abundance?[[4]](#footnote-4) Do you trust only yourself to make that abundance possible? I wonder what is it that you lack? What is it that prevents you from a full expression of faith? What is it that is standing between you and God? What keeps you from being the follower, the disciple, the believer, the witness that God wants and needs you to be?[[5]](#footnote-5)

The rich young ruler asks, “What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?” We know that you can’t do anything to inherit because you inherit when someone dies. The Apostle Paul tells us in Romans 8:17 that we are “heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.” The rich young ruler wants to do something, but God’s grace is a free, undeserved gift given to all.

In her new book, Imperfect Courage: Live a Life of Purpose by Leaving Comfort and Going Scared, Jessica Honegger talks about generous giving. She encourages people to ask some hard questions like: how much money do I need? Will my answer always be “more”? She asks if we can set a finish line for ourselves and give away everything beyond that? Or if an outsider were to look at how we use our time, our energy, and our resources, what would that outsider learn about our priorities? When money comes in, should giving rather than keeping be the default, not as the exception but the rule? Unless there’s a compelling reason to keep, should we normally give? How can we shift our approach to generosity to become how much do we give away, instead of how much do we keep? She suggests instead of calculating how much money we have to give away, we could instead plan a reasonable “keep” budget and then give the rest away. It is all about acknowledging our fear around money and recalibrating our point of view toward one of abundance. Instead of scarcity, creating this shift in our giving and ultimately living because we believe that everything we own belongs to God.

We are in the season of catalogs arriving every day in the mail showing us things that we could buy. We think that buying things will make us happy because it means that we have what we want. We think that it gives us control. I taught as a teacher in Japan after college and I was paid in cash. I remember sitting in my tatami house with the cash that I had made spread all around me. I thought it was mine, all mine. And I should have been so happy, but I wasn’t.

The first Methodist, John Wesley, in his sermon titled On Riches, rephrased part of our scripture for today by saying, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for those that have riches not to trust in them.”[[6]](#footnote-6) When I was in Japan, I thought I was wealthy, I mean, I had all of this cash. I could buy what I wanted, I could go where I wanted to go, and I could do what I wanted to do. I trusted that my money would bring me happiness and make my life complete, but I still felt afraid and alone. I was living in a foreign country by myself after all! Money made it so much easier for me to pay attention to what I wanted, that I forgot about what God wanted.

To go to church in Japan, I traveled an hour and half by bus, train, and then by walking. I would travel so far and sit in a church where I would wear a Walkman and headphones and tune into a radio station where the worship was translated into English. On Christmas Eve I went to church because it was Christmas Eve, but the translators weren’t there. I didn’t even recognize the Christmas songs. But, sitting in that church listening to words that I didn’t know, I felt peace and like God was right there with me. I knew that we were celebrating Jesus’ birth, but that was about it.

Jesus is unsettling, his message is like sitting in a worship service where you don’t understand anything that is being said because it is in Japanese. But Jesus’ message is about the transformation of the world as we know it. The world tells us life is about getting more stuff and then protecting our wealth when we have it. Jesus doesn’t prop up the powerful or silence the brave. Jesus tells us the first will be last and the last will be first, the rich will be poor and the poor will be rich.

For the rich young ruler in our story, what stood between him and God’s kingdom was his attachment to things because the things he owned wound up owning him. He trusted his money to save him, not God. When we get so attached to our stuff, we aren’t free. I don’t want to be the person who misses out on what God is doing because I can’t let go.

What stands between you and God? The most repeated phrase in the Bible is “Do not be afraid” sometimes translated as “Fear not.” We all have fear, but fear doesn’t have to be where we set up camp and live. There is a place above our fear, and that place is love.[[7]](#footnote-7) Glennon Doyle says, “fear is real but it is not the boss of us. Love is the boss of us.”[[8]](#footnote-8) The second most repeated phrase in the Bible is “Remember.” Do not be afraid, fear not by remembering that you are a child of God. Today may we do whatever it takes to remember that we are a child of God. Tie a ribbon around your wrist or write it on your hand. Remember in the shower your baptism that reminds us that we are a beloved child of God. Choose community instead of acquiring more. Look outside of yourself because our worth is experienced in relationship with others. Do not be afraid, fear not by remembering that everyone else in this world is a child of God too. May we be brave because we are a child of God. May we be kind because everyone else is a child of God, too.[[9]](#footnote-9)

1. https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/9292/weekly-preaching-october-14-2018?utm\_campaign=shareaholic&utm\_medium=twitter&utm\_source=socialnetwork [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.davidlose.net/2018/10/pentecost-21-b-the-rich-man-and-all-of-us/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3699 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3699 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3699 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. https://www.umcmission.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/Sermon-108-On-Riches [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. https://momastery.com/blog/2016/11/17/together-letters/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. https://momastery.com/blog/2016/11/17/together-letters/ [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. https://momastery.com/blog/2015/08/04/the-gift-of-the-green-blob/ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)