

Sermon for Sunday, Feb. 18, 2024

Mark 10:17-31

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen

I don't usually create a title for my sermons. But if I were to do so this week the title would be: *"It's not about poverty, it's about vulnerability."* By the end of today's sermon it is my intent that you will know why I chose this title. *(Pause)*

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the synoptic gospels because so much of what is written in one is included in the other two. The majority of New Testament Biblical scholars think that the gospel of Mark was written first. By studying the literary forms and details these scholars have concluded that the authors of Matthew and Luke knew well (and may have had a written copy) of the gospel of Mark in front of them as they wrote their versions of the gospel.

Why do I tell you this? The story of the man who kneels in front of Jesus is told in all three of these gospels. In Mark he is simply called "a man." In Matthew he is called a "young man." In Luke he is called "a certain ruler." Notice that in Mark we aren't told that this man has many possessions until the very last phrase of the narration.

On the one hand, by waiting until the end of this story, Mark, the ever clever author, throws in a detail that will recapture the audience's attention. But this detail also adds a depth and seriousness to this story; a story that we might be otherwise tempted to overlook.

By virtue of his many possessions the rich man had power and respect in the culture of that day. He kneels before Jesus to honor him. In the same way he calls Jesus "good teacher." BUT in that culture it is assumed that if someone like this man honors you, you have an obligation to honor him back. Jesus doesn't play that cultural game. Knowing this explains why Jesus diverts the man's opening greeting and says that "only God is good."

Everyone present in this scene lives and operates in a culture where inheritance is your ticket to the good life. If (when) you inherit land it provides the foundation that allows you to grow more crops, buy more possessions, and barring a disaster, to set a little money aside. For you see, if a small landowner had a misfortune

like a severe injury or a fire or a major crop loss it didn't just hurt him financially for a crop year. It may be the beginning of the end of his ability to continue farming his land. In those days he couldn't go to a bank and get a loan to tide him over this rough patch for there were no banks. There were only rich people. So you might have to sell your land in order to survive. As a small landowner, you might be so desperate that you would sell at rock bottom prices. As a result a wealthy landowner ends up with more property and more power and the small landowner with nothing. This was the economic reality of life in the Roman Empire 2000 years ago. *(Pause)*

Let's turn our attention to the commandments that Jesus listed in his conversation with the rich man. Did you notice something? When Jesus listed the commandments he added a new one: *you shall not defraud*. Once again there is a difference between Matthew and Luke's narration of Jesus' response to the rich man for they do not include this additional commandment.

What's going on here? There are no simple explanations, but it is certainly possible that Jesus knew that this rich man gained those possessions through buying property at deeply discounted rates; rates that might be considered fraudulent. Jesus knows the economic reality of Israel and that the small landowner has no court of law to advocate for him. He is at the mercy of the richest person around. Therefore, while we are reading quite a bit into the text, this might explain why Jesus adds the commandment not to defraud. Basically what he is saying is that if you are rich you have probably accomplished it through unethical means—through fraud. *(Pause)*

Another aspect of the religious culture of this time assumes that if you are successful, if you gain more and more possessions, then it is because you are living a pious religious life as a follower of Yahweh/God. You are living according to the Torah and following all of the commandments. In return God is rewarding you with possessions. It can be quite the ego trip.

If the rich man's earthly life is so good, why does he come to Jesus? It seems that he figures he has accomplished all that is needful for a good earthly life. He's succeeded and it's primarily because he has "followed the rules." But now he wants to make sure that he "follows the rules" so that he can be successful in the next life. He had achieved all that is needful for this life and now he wants to know what to do to achieve eternal life.

Jesus sees through all of the economic and cultural trappings that this man has lived into and says, "Give away all of our possessions and then come follow me." In effect Jesus is asking the man to relinquish all the riches that he has amassed and allow himself to become vulnerable. The rich man's possessions had created a barrier between himself and God. His possessions were his safety net; his insurance policy. But Jesus is asking him to give up the safety net, the insurance policy and allow himself to be vulnerable...just as vulnerable as the many poor people that surrounded him. That's what Jesus is teaching in the second half of the reading for today.

At this point I need to turn away from the main point to debunk an old idea that keeps coming up. Back in medieval times a Christian commentator was struggling with this text. It seems that he had been told that there was a gate in the wall surrounding Jerusalem called "the eye of the needle." Camels were the semi-trucks of that day and time, often laden with large bundles of trade goods. As the supposition goes camels would have to be unloaded in order to go through this gate and get into the city. There is absolutely no evidence that this gate ever existed. But the idea of camels having to shed their packs resonated with many people and it is an idea that stuck in people's minds. By extension then comes the idea that you have to get rid of your possessions in order to get to heaven.

No, the story of the rich man isn't recorded to encourage us to give away all of our possessions. This incident is recorded to force us to consider the economic systems that we live within. Does it matter that the clothing that we wear might be manufactured by children? There are news reports that have documented that this is a real occurrence. Does it matter that the meat that we eat may have come from a processing plant that hires underage teens who are not or cannot attend school? There are news stories reporting this to be true.

We live within these systems. We benefit from these systems. Jesus names a system that exploited the poor 2000 years ago. The challenge is that this economic system still exists and continues to exploit the poor even today.

So what are we called to do and to be? How then shall we live? I don't think that this teaching from Jesus insists that we are to give away everything that we own so that we become impoverished. No, Jesus isn't calling us into poverty. Rather, Jesus is calling us into vulnerability. Jesus is calling us to recognize the economic

systems that we live within and to understand how these systems cause harm; maybe not to us but to our neighbors.

When Jesus sent out his disciples on their first missionary trip he told them that they were supposed to pack light. In essence it was an exercise in vulnerability. It's the same for us. It's not about the poverty, it's about the vulnerability. AND, we can take great comfort in remembering another point that Jesus made in this teaching: "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

No, we probably cannot and should not give away everything that we own. But we can open ourselves up to the possibility of being vulnerable. We can open ourselves up to an ever-increasing reliance on God to supply our needs. We have a God who loves us and is committed to us. God will take care of us. For God all things are possible—even getting a camel through the eye of a needle—even gifting us with eternal life. It's not about poverty my friends, it's about vulnerability. Do we dare? Without doubt, this is a hard question, but it is the challenge that comes to us from today's Scripture lesson.

How do we know that the rich man DIDN'T go away and eventually live up to this teaching? We don't know, but maybe he will muster up the energy to live into this idea. Do you keep certain commandments? Not yet. You have to grow into it. This is a big thing and it probably won't happen over night.