



THE GREAT QUESTION

November 11, 2018, Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 10:17-31

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Many years ago now, perhaps as many as 25 years ago, I was reading a newspaper spread that featured entrepreneurs and their secrets to success. It was a remarkable array of people engaged in a variety of enterprises. But the one that caught my eye, and the only one I have remembered over all these years, was a young girl, maybe 10 years old, who was featured because she had the top sales in Girl Scout cookies in the country that year. I've forgotten now just how many thousands of boxes she had sold...but I've never forgotten her sales method. When asked how she could possibly have sold so many cookies, she said, "Well, I look them right in the eye...and make them feel guilty!"

It is the week before Stewardship Dedication Sunday and I'm caught between a rock and a hard place. There has been some feedback that the pastor should never discuss money, yet money was a frequent topic of our prophet-preacher, Jesus. So, as often happens to preachers, they get caught on many a Sunday between the congregation and the biblical text with nowhere to hide. The story we read today is from Mark 10, which Rebekah reminded us a couple of weeks ago is a chapter focused on discipleship; what it means to follow Jesus. This story is found in three out of four Gospels. That doesn't happen very often, so when it does occur, it is a signal that we have come upon a story of some importance to the first followers of Jesus—a story that just might be important for us, then, too. Commonly known as the story of the "rich young ruler," that title is a conflation of all three gospel accounts. We learn from Mark that the man is rich because Mark says he had "many possessions." Matthew tells us he is young, and Luke is the Gospel that calls him a "ruler." I suppose, taken together, they make the point that this was a young man of some means and power who had nowhere to go in this world but up.



Yet this up-and-comer enters Mark's story and kneels before Jesus. He may have many possessions, but he seeks one thing more...to inherit eternal life. He wants to know what he must do in order to enter the kingdom of God. So Jesus tells him to obey the commandments, especially that second half of the Decalogue, the ones that tell us how we are to treat our neighbor. With the bravado of his age, he says with a confidence I cannot imagine mustering, that he has done all of that since his youth. That's when Jesus gives him one more thing, then, to do, well two more things, really: "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

Mark records the reaction of the man this way: "When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions." Shocked. Grieving. This story makes it seem like Jesus thought a good recruitment tool might be to 'look would-be disciples in the eye...and make them feel guilty!' Jesus even compounds the problem by remarking that it will be as hard for a wealthy person to enter the kingdom of God as it is for a camel to thread itself through the eye of a needle. This is where we get stuck, so to speak. And maybe depressed. Or worried. As one wealthy member of a Baptist Church said to his pastor with tears in his eyes after studying this passage, "I have reached the conclusion that I'm never going to stand before God and hear Him tell me, 'I wish you had kept more for yourself.'"ⁱ When Jesus' 12 disciples heard him say this...the ones who had dropped boats and nets and even a father-in-law to follow Jesus...they were perplexed, greatly astounded, even, and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Except for a few remarkable saints, like Francis of Assisi, who disavowed family wealth to live a life of simplicity and generosity...well, who can be saved?

Guilt has been the overriding response from that first day on...because very few of us choose the path to the kingdom Jesus suggests here. Interpreters through the years have tried to lessen the blunt force of this text. Some have said Jesus was just using a vivid, even humorous metaphor to make a point...that there was in Jerusalem a very small entrance point in the city wall called the Camel's Gate that no camel carrying rider and bags could possibly squeeze through...but that turns

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



out to be some preacher's imaginative exit strategy from this difficult text because no such gate ever existed. Someone else said the Greek word for 'camel' was mistranslated. The word for 'camel' is closely related to the word for a thick rope used on ships. That may reduce the size of the impossible image, but not by much. Getting a thick rope through the eye of the needle is only slightly less impossible than getting a camel threaded through.

Still others have suggested that Jesus' word was to this man alone, not directed to everyone for all time. This is the explanation I favor, of course. How about you? Jesus asked this young man to give up the thing that got in the way of his loving God above all else. For him, it turned out to be possessions. But for you, well, Jesus might ask you to give up an overriding focus on career that causes you to ignore your family or your health as well as God. Or maybe you are to give up some hobby or habit that impedes following Jesus. It's different for each of us, you see, and maybe I can choose what I think God might want me to give up in order to follow him, like some of do for the six weeks of Lent, a limited run.

That's an interpretation that has some merit, I suppose. What does prevent me from loving God with all my heart, mind, and soul...from following Jesus with my best efforts and my deep resources...from being willing to set whatever that is aside for the sake of following Jesus and the promise of eternal life. Or maybe it's just a cop out from a hard demand of the Gospel. In any case, like the young man, Jesus looks him and each of us in the eye and makes us all feel guilty, right?

No, that's not right. There is one detail that transforms this story from one of judgment into something else completely. A detail that is easy to miss, but once you see it, you can't forget it. In verse 21, right after this young man has boastfully, even foolishly claimed that he has kept all the commandments perfectly ever since he was a boy, Mark says this: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him."

Jesus, looking at him, loved him. It's the only time in the entire Gospel where it says explicitly that Jesus loved someone. The only time. And it was this man...this wealthy man who had everything he needed and everything going for him. This



man who still yearned for something more; something deeper; something that would last. Jesus looked at him, and loved him. You see, Jesus was never into guilt...that is something we have put on him and put on ourselves and often are all too happy to put onto other people, too. Jesus saw him for exactly who he was and loved him. It doesn't say he saw him for who he was and loved him *anyway*. He saw him and loved him.

My friends, Jesus loves you. He sees exactly who you are inside and out and he loves you. Not in spite of who you are but precisely for just who you are. He knows what you wrestle with and struggle against. He knows what you give away with generosity and what you find hard to let go of. He knows what you enjoy and fills you up and he knows what depletes you and what you most deeply wish you could find. He knows of the faith that guides you in this life and the hope you have that there is more ahead when death shall come. He looks at you and loves you not in spite of but because of.

One of our friends, Doug's and mine, the late K.C. Ptomey, was part of our clergy group, the Moveable Feast. K.C. had a distinguished career in ministry. He was a faithful disciple of Jesus all of his life. In college, he participated in non-violent sit-ins in the early years of the Civil Rights movement in the deep South. He was a great preacher in the pulpit and a fearless missionary in the streets working for peace and justice. He was generous in spirit and generous with his money toward causes he cared about. Near his retirement, after 41 years of leading annual pledge efforts and his share of Capital Campaigns, K.C. said this to his congregation, the Westminster Presbyterian Church in Nashville:

“I've seen everything...house-to-house calls, letters, telephone campaigns, challenges to tithe, banners, posters, fancy stationery, charts, graphs, movies, slides, Bible studies, suppers, lunches, breakfasts, desserts, efforts to impart guilt, promises of eternal bliss, threats of hell-fire and damnation. I've seen it all...I've done it all...” K. C. then said, “But what a lifetime of ministry has finally taught me is that generosity simply comes out of people who have experienced the love of God, the unmerited grace and goodness of the



living God, which is something we can never earn, which is always out of proportion to what we deserve. Awareness,” K.C. continued, “deep awareness of the abundant and undeserved goodness of God is the only thing I know of that can elicit abounding generosity. Guilt won’t do it. Slick stewardship messages won’t do it. Shame won’t do it. Charts... letters... sermons won’t do it. But awareness, deep awareness of the abundant and undeserved goodness of God—that will do it.

“Drive down the street on a fall day and feast your eyes on the colors. That’ll do it. Hold your newborn child or grandchild in your arms and feel those tiny fingers wrap around your thumb. That’ll do it. Listen to the doctor who, after long hours of surgery, reports that your loved one is going to be okay. That’ll do it. Stand in this place any Sunday, joining your voice with others, singing of God’s tenderness. God’s forgiveness. God’s love. That’ll do it. Look around you at the faces of those with whom you worship this morning. Linger over one or two who have been an important part of your faith journey, who have loved you, encouraged, inspired, forgiven you. That’ll do it. ...Allow yourself fully to appreciate the abundance that is yours, and your generosity will overflow.”ⁱⁱ

On this particular day, the man with many possessions walked away shocked and grieving because the invitation to follow Jesus seemed to cost too much. On most days—okay, every day—it still costs more than I’m fully willing to give, which should be everything. But the truth is, we don’t know how this story ended for that man. We don’t know whether, as he grew up more and got older, he grew willing to give more away if not quite everything. But I hope he remembered how Jesus looked at him that day and loved him. That the goodness of the living God produced a divine and deep awareness that lifted him up until his generosity overflowed in the congregation. In the world. I don’t think this is a sad story, but one full of love and alive with possibility. And it lays before us one of the paths toward the kingdom.

Amen.



ⁱ As quoted in David Platt's article, "The Word Does the Work," *Christianity Today*, August 2009.

ⁱⁱ As quoted in a sermon preached by Agnes Norfleet, "A Love Story" at Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church on October 25, 2015.