

Providence Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Dr. David Pettit  
October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021  
Mark 10:17-31

I blame this morning's gospel reading on the lectionary. As I was planning out the scriptures, I assume this passage was in the lectionary and that is why I thought to include it. As I spent time planning ahead for stewardship season this week, it seemed odd to preach on this passage today. After all, if you sell everything and give it to the poor, you won't have much to pledge come early November.

Well, for the last several weeks, I have been following a theme. The core: what is at the core of our faith. We could repaint the walls and recarpet the floor, change up music or plan new activities—we could change a great deal and disagree on a great deal, but what is at the core of this faith journey? And so, we have been reading our scriptures with that lens. And so, while not fitting to stewardship season, our passage is fitting for this season because it makes us work a little harder for an answer. It is a frustrating little passage, not just for its hyperbolic and rather scathing comments about wealth, but because it undermines much of what we value and embody. And like the poem Amy read, it suggests that we are missing something. Furthermore, the fix is not just a little tweak or minor change, but some awakening, some kind of reset, some coming out of the cave.

This story subverts the things we have often emphasized and sought after. It subverts the ways we often think about the world and find ourselves in the church. This young man sounds familiar. For someone who lives in a community-focused culture, he sounds very individualist. He speaks in a first-person voice with first-person concerns: what must *I* do, look what *I* have done. Secondly, he is concerned with his own eternal life, which is the way I was reared to think, that faith is about being saved, about life after death. Every evangelistic tract says so. Thirdly, he knows his scriptures, can quote chapter and verse. He can defend his actions with scripture. Fourth, he knows the value of actions and acts. He has obeyed the commandments. And still more, he is concerned with being good. Isn't that what we teach in our homes, churches, society, the value of being a good person.

It is clearly important to this young man to let Jesus know what he has done, how good he has been, and what he has accomplished: all these things I have kept since my youth, he says. And the other detail we learn that he does not state outright, maybe he doesn't see it outright, but Jesus does—the other detail is that he has

achieved or inherited what we all tend to seek: wealth and the comfort, stability, and leisure that tends to come with it.

So, while this rich man is often portrayed as a little vain and pitiable, he seeks and has achieved much of what we value. These include a concern for our own interests, confidence in eternal life, a sense that we are good, pride in accomplishments and character, and the security and leisure that achieving wealth brings.

If I got out the white board and we wrote on it all the things we come to church for, or what the church is about, we would probably put up more noble things, like love, forgiveness, community, and service. And yet, aren't we all motivated by comparable things as this young man? We are a society that tends to be individually focused. Our theological traditions have emphasized personal salvation as well as eternal life. We have prided ourselves in morality and in being good. We have interpreted success and material things as blessings from God. Are we that different from this gentleman?

And if we are like him in these ways, are we also like him in that we still come looking for something more? If this man was satisfied and secure in all these things, he probably wouldn't have come to Jesus for something more. But there he is. And like standing in front of refrigerator with a hankering but unsure what we are looking for, are we like the man in our story in this way also?

Well, not only does Jesus say stark things about wealth, but Jesus' response is not just to offer a little tip or tweak to help this person sleep at night. He undermines everything he is about. Rather than praising him for all he has and has accomplished, Jesus tells this little achiever what he lacks. Ouch. While the young man has kept the commandments and is a good person, Jesus says that is not enough. Yikes. And while he has achieved security and wealth, Jesus instructs him to let go of that security and to distribute his wealth to the poor. Oooh. Still more, he tells the young man to give up his precious individuality and sovereignty over his own choices and to come follow. Huh. And even more, this young man has tried to amass everything, achievement, personal salvation, and wealth and success, and Jesus tells him that his pursuits do not dovetail, but are at odds with one another, that it is virtually impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. You can't have it all. You have to make choices, you have to take a different path.

Now the disciples are observing this exchange; they are listening and watching. And while they are quite different, or so it seems, from this wealthy person, they too are getting a little uncomfortable. They are looking on with concern. They see what they have in common, and if Jesus has such harsh words for him, they start to wonder about and worry about their own standing.

Just as the man was shocked and went away grieving, the disciples respond with a bit of shock. They are perplexed: “they were greatly astounded and said to one another: ‘Then who can be saved?’” If this guy is not fit for eternal life, then what is our fate? They clearly are concerned with some of the same of things, of eternal life, and of being recognized for all the good and all the sacrifices they have made. For just like the young man “kept all” the commandments, the disciples proclaim, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.”

The scholar Kenneth Bailey has drawn attention to the way that many of the gospel stories and parables of Jesus are structured like middle-eastern stories. And in such stories, there is often a center-oriented structure, which means if we mapped it on paper, elements in the second half of the story would correspond in some way to similar elements in the first half of the story. For example, the concern of eternal life in v.17 seventeen appears again in v.30. The litany of commandments that the young man has purportedly fulfilled in vv.18-19 corresponds to the litany of things the disciples have purportedly left to follow Jesus in v.29. The “I have kept all these” of v.20 corresponds to the “we have left everything” of v.28. The shock of v.23 corresponds to the astonishment and perplexity of v.26. So the structure of the story is reinforcing the connection between him and them.

In this structure, Bailey emphasizes that a strong point of emphasis comes at or just beyond the center. In our story, we get that center point which is further marked and emphasized with repetition—the three-fold repetition of the Kingdom of God. We hear a three-fold emphasis both on the difficulty of perceiving what Christ is calling them all to, and the emphasis not on their individual accomplishments and achievements and personal comforts, but on entering the kingdom of God. V. 23: “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” V.24: 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! V. 25. “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.” It is hard, it is hard, it is hard. To enter the kingdom of God, to enter the kingdom of God, to enter the kingdom of God.

Do you hear the shift? From the focus on “I” and goodness and accomplishment and comfort to entering the kingdom of God, so to suggest these are not necessarily the same.

The kingdom of God is an oft repeated expression in the gospels, though not one often explained. We hear of the kingdom of God in metaphor, in parable, in statements that begin, “the kingdom of God is like...” The kingdom of God is a central and all important focus of the gospels, though it is a reality that we can’t fully get our words and ideas around. It seems to represent more than just heaven, or eternal life. Rather it carries the notion of life under God’s rule – life lived in God’s care and for God’s purposes; a life that delights in God, a life lived in the community of God, the economy of God. It is an expression of the world when God’s gracious purposes are reestablished. It is not just a little tweak, but a reimagining of the world.

A young man clutching his treasured life, wanting only to add eternal life to the loot, cannot really know of the kingdom of God. Perhaps it takes a different mindset – one more open to Christ, one more open to the community, one less encumbered by things and worries, and more open to the kingdom’s unfolding before us, and among us, and even in us. And Jesus seems to know that it will take some real work, some drastic work, for this man to give himself to such imagination. And so Jesus emphasizes for this man what he must let go of, and how he must unsettle his little kingdom if he wants to truly enter the kingdom of God, that is a life shaped by God’s grace and purposes.

Now within the story structure that Bailey highlights, there are a couple other places where the thrust of the story is discerned. One it is the shift or the variation between the correspondences pointed out earlier. Meaning the correspondences are exactly the same, but they create a point of connection drawing to light the similarities and differences. But the other place is at the end, how something is added, or a shift is thrown in and drawn attention to. In this story, it comes in v. 30. For here the focus shifts from all the things that one must lose or leave or let go or sell and towards what one gains. So, in v.1 we have the worry about inheriting eternal life, and here in v.30 we hear all things that we gain by letting go, including eternal life.

You see, Jesus says that the journey of following means that we will gain the things that we desire and seek, but that our normal modes of thinking and operating can’t achieve them, that our cultural codes of operating will not lead us to. We don’t know how to get there, which is why we might have to change some things,

let go of some things, so that we might be able to change our pace, change our thinking, change our habits and rhythms, so that we might discover and enter the kingdom of God. For anyone who has left such things – will they not receive a hundredfold – in new relationships, in houses, and family, in a sense of home and connection. The anxiety we have over leaving and letting go is transformed to celebration of all that we receive as we give ourselves to the mystery and possibility of God’s kingdom.

Now this passage, and many others like it, frustrate the little achiever in us. We want to know the steps, and to tick it off the list of things to do. But Jesus invites us into a fuller possibility of life and well-being and community. But it takes imagination, it takes a willingness to up-end our thinking and ways of living a bit.

As I was working on this sermon this week, I came across a book review article and the author was quoting the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann. Brueggemann states, “When the text comes to speak about [the] alternative life wrought by God, the text must use poetry. There is no other way to speak.” I might amend to say creative genres, non-straightforward speech like parables and stories such as this one. He continues, “We know about that future—we know surely—but we do not know concretely enough to issue memos and blueprints. We know only enough to sing songs and speak poems. That however, is enough. We stake our lives on such poems....”

In the same book being referenced, Brueggemann casts the preacher as a poet. It’s a different kind of speech act. Today, the sermon is often referred to as the teaching, the model has become the teaching-sermon. Brueggemann envisions a poetic sermon. He states:

Poets, in the moment of preaching, are permitted to perceive and voice the world differently, to dare a new phrase, a new picture, a fresh juxtaposition of matters long known. Poets are authorized to invite a new conversation, with new voices sounded, new hearings possible. The new conversation may end in freedom to trust and courage to relinquish. The new conversation, on which our very lives depend, requires a poet and not a moralist. Because finally church people are like other people; we are not changed by new rules. The deep places in our lives—places of resistance and embrace—are not ultimately reached by instruction. Those places of resistance and embrace are reached only by stories, by images, metaphors, and phrases that line out the world differently, apart from our fears and hurt. The reflection that comes from the poet requires playfulness, imagination, and interpretation.

The new conversation allows for ambiguity, probe, and [the] daring hunch....

Brueggemann uses a phrase in there: the deep places in our lives. It is apt phrase for what Jesus is interested in for both the rich man, and the disciples, and us. It is not just a few good works, or avoiding of hell, it is the imaginative remaking of the world in God's grace. It is discovering the relationship with Christ where we can trust him, trust the letting go, trust the receiving. And in that imaginative remaking, the worries about ourselves and our achievements and our goodness will be washed away, transformed into better questions through the remaking.

Now that is a lot to take in. It is not a nice little application. My apologies. Except Jesus does give us a starting point. Break from your patterns enough to come follow me, whatever it takes to do so. Whatever it takes to do so.

- Mark 10: 17-31

### *The Rich Man*

<sup>17</sup> 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?" <sup>18</sup> Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. <sup>19</sup> 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.' " <sup>20</sup> He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." <sup>21</sup> 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." <sup>22</sup> When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

<sup>23</sup> 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!" <sup>24</sup> 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! <sup>25</sup> 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." <sup>26</sup> They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" <sup>27</sup> Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

<sup>28</sup> Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.”  
<sup>29</sup> 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, <sup>30</sup> 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. <sup>31</sup> But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

**Poem: “From Out the Cave”**

*by Joyce Sutphen*

When you have been  
at war with yourself  
for so many years that  
you have forgotten why,  
when you have been driving  
for hours and only  
gradually begin to realize  
that you have lost the way,  
when you have cut  
hastily into the fabric,  
when you have signed  
papers in distraction,  
when it has been centuries  
since you watched the sun set  
or the rain fall, and the clouds,  
drifting overhead, pass as flat  
as anything on a postcard;  
when, in the midst of these  
everyday nightmares, you  
understand that you could  
wake up,  
you could turn  
and go back  
to the last thing you  
remember doing  
with your whole heart:  
that passionate kiss,  
the brilliant drop of love

rolling along the tongue of a green leaf,  
then you wake,  
you stumble from your cave,  
blinking in the sun,  
naming every shadow  
as it slips.