

"Possible Only with God"
Rev. Rachel Callender
Mark 10:17-31 CEB
Medford UMC; NJ

Someone once shared with me a troubling story about their grandparents - so we're talking about the time of the Great Depression in Rock Lake, North Dakota. And her purpose in sharing this story with me was to give framework to her sort-of, unmolded view of religion - Christianity in particular. Her grandparents were devout Christians, each from a different church, each a different denomination. They were very poor and lived in a tiny farmhouse. Our storytellers' mother was their fourth child, Joyce, and Joyce was four years old when she became a big sister to Melvin. Melvin though, was born with a disease called jaundice - which is very serious, it needs quick care. Well, if you've ever been to North Dakota, you can probably visualize what makes this particularly stressful. To get into the small-town center, to even get to your neighbor's house, it is miles worth of walking, remember they wouldn't have had a car, they couldn't afford a bicycle. And so, four-year-old Joyce, 4 Years Old, was sent into town to find a doctor. It took her a very long time to do so, it didn't help that she was a dreadfully shy child, I can relate, and Melvin passed before getting medical treatment. In their grief, the parents turned to their respective churches, and the message they received was clear, "You prioritized a doctor over a pastor to perform a baptism, and your child is paying the price. But we can retroactively save him, for a hefty fee." As you can imagine, this impoverished farm family who barely had enough to eat couldn't pull together the money needed. From there, they each

left their churches, heartbroken and ashamed over the false message they had received: that heaven is a rich man's game.

Today's text is from our first Gospel writer, Mark, but it is also told by Matthew and Luke. And with each of the Gospel's texts, the title for the section is always something like "The Rich Man", "The Rich Man's Questions", "The Young Rich Man", and so on. That is to say that no matter the writer or the translation, one thing is essential for understanding this story - the man we're focusing on today's identity is tightly wound to his income, he doesn't even get a name. Money is not just something he has, it's who he is. And as I mentioned in Friday's newsletter, this text has a way of making us uncomfortable. We are "The Rich Man" in this story - even if money isn't our identifier, even if it's something else. This text has a way of reflecting the question back at us: what is God asking of us that we feel is too much, that seems impossible to do?

At the start of today's reading Jesus is well-established in his ministry, and we're coming towards the end of his travels toward Jerusalem where the passion narrative will occur. This is yet another public Jesus encounter where someone walks away unhappy - it's not like the usual negative encounters Jesus is placed in. Typically, when people walk away from Jesus unhappy, they are religious leaders trying to trick Him and then end up getting stuck in their own web. They walk away angry. Jesus see's right through their intentions and turns their questioning on its head. That's not the case here. Yes, the man walks away disappointed but the whole interaction is unlike any other. This is a man of high-status, and similarly to Zacchaeus whom I spoke of two weeks back, he throws caution to the wind when Jesus comes into view. Here, this man runs and kneels before Jesus -

showing respect for Jesus' position as a teacher and is entering into this encounter really from a place of humility, "I can learn from you."

Once again, like Zacchaeus, this isn't what we approach it expecting. Zacchaeus was a good man. The Rich Man is a good man. He is breaking the generalization that all those who are wealthy look down their noses on everyone. That's simply not the case, people are far more complex than we give them credit. What is that funny quote attributed to Mark Twain? "All generalizations are false, including this one." But it's true!

And the text tells us that when approached with this question by the man, something he is truly curious about and seeks Christ's guidance on, Jesus looks at him carefully - looks deep into his heart and soul - and loves him. He is recognizable as a beloved child of God. The divine goodness that has shaped him into God's image can be seen with the eyes. And this man loves and serves God, mostly. From their exchange, we get the idea that when he claims to have followed the commandments since childhood, that he very well might be telling the truth, that Jesus seems to believe him, "Teacher, I've kept all of these things since I was a boy." If true, it's a pretty bold claim, but Jesus doesn't even bother questioning the truth in that claim, because it doesn't even matter. His question in and of itself is flawed. He's asking for an answer on what to do, not asking for new life in Christ.

So, Jesus says to do the one thing that He knows that the man can't bring himself to do, "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me." Oh, you can't do that? Well, have you

considered that eternal life is beyond your doing? That it is possible with God, and God only.

Honestly, I feel bad for the Rich Man in this story. Maybe I empathize with him too much, I don't know. I feel that "getting the wind knocked out of you" moment he must be experiencing here. Jesus' response was not what he was expecting, and it is a lot. It's not something you can do, not something you have done, it's about completely surrendering yourself to God. Think about it: a young, rich man. He has probably spent his life as the high achiever, praised again and again for navigating this chaotic world and coming out on top. He's probably someone people like having around, like being friends with. He's a forward thinker, a run at the problem straight on kind of guy.

But human achievement is not going to cut it here. I'd like to say it was just back then but even in present day, we wrongfully equate achievement with God's blessing; "I got that promotion! Prayers answered! What a blessing from God!" It's too grounded though, too earthly.

This man came before Jesus in a posture of humility asking for the formula for eternal life, probably half-expecting an affirmation that his adherence to the commandments was already his golden ticket, and Jesus chops right into the one thing that this man loves more than God, the one thing that has developed into its own idol - his riches, "You are lacking one thing.. there's one thing that remains a stronger pull in your life than God, one thing that you'd trade God in for, one thing you refuse to relinquish control on. And you can't overcome it without me, can you?" It's important to note that this story is the one and only time Jesus asks someone to give up all their money and

possessions, which is to say that none of this is about the stuff. It's about being limited by what we think is impossible, so we keep a part of ourselves from surrendering to Christ.

In some telling's of this story, there's an addition in verse 24. As it was just read, Jesus told the disciples, "Children, it's difficult to enter God's kingdom!" but with the addition, Jesus says, "Children, it's difficult for those who trust in riches to enter God's kingdom!" The key words here being, "trust in". Money is not the problem, it's not the enemy. Some people have lots of it, some people don't - that's not actually the issue at hand here. It's the trust and reliance in it. It's the power it can hold if allowed, that that's what can actually save him. It's the way it can become a crutch. This man loves God but serves money. That is what Jesus is getting at.

And we all probably struggle with our "thing", right? The boundary line where the cost of true discipleship becomes just a little too heavy. Maybe for you its money, it could be, or maybe it's God's call on your heart to forgive someone who you feel really wronged you. Maybe it's a large sacrifice of your time amidst a jam-packed schedule. Maybe it's God's call on your restless character to actually take up Sabbath and to not just make that your house cleaning day. Guilty.

There are countless things that each person here can have in their life that is the button that makes them go, "What, that? No, no, no, that would be impossible. How would I get other things done? How would I maintain my current quality of life? How would I even approach that person who I haven't spoken to in a year? How? There's no way." We keep looking to Christ for a repair, a tweak but God has called us into new life, into

a rebirth in God's grace, to start building from the ground up. The Rich Man wants to do something, not become something.

This is the same dilemma as an early Christian's writing found in the crypts of Westminster Abbey. It reads: "When I was young and free and my imagination had no limits, I dreamed of changing the world. As I grew older and wiser, I discovered the world would not change, so I shortened my sights somewhat and decided to change only my country. But it too seemed immovable. As I grew into my twilight years, in one last desperate attempt, I settled for changing only my family, those closest to me, but alas, they would have none of it. And now as I lay on my deathbed, I suddenly realize: If I had only changed myself first, then by example I would have changed my family. From their inspiration and encouragement, I would have then been able to better my country, and who knows: I may have even changed the world."

Surrendering our individual selves, even the things that seems impossible to relinquish, it can change the world. Notice though, even before Jesus pops the air out of this man's eagerness, how Jesus first responds to his referencing Jesus as "Good Teacher": Jesus counter-questions him by asking, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except the one God." It's not that Jesus is saying He isn't God, it's that right off the bat, Jesus is trying to redirect the man's focus of goodness from the tangible earth to the spiritual God. Shift your eyesight. Jesus is already encouraging him away from equating goodness with Christs' achievements as a teacher, but instead equating goodness with God and God alone. There's no achievement goal, no formula, no amount of striving that gets us heaven - we cannot do it on our own, it's all God. Look up!

And that's where the impossible joins in: it's not just about our belief in God, God also believes in us. God believes in our capacity to choose to do what's right, to look to God to guide our morals and ethics, to put in the work to discern what stands in our way from a fuller life in God's kingdom and to, with God's help, overcome those obstacles. God believes in you. And I say that here, standing at a pulpit in the Lord's house, with no waver in my voice: God believes in you. God believes in our capacity to be compassionate, our capacity to do good, our capacity to release our earthly ties for heavenly ones, in our capacity to give up control. God believes in you.

When the disciples were shocked that this high-status man who followed the commandments was not simply given a gold star, that Jesus didn't even go after, they asked, "If not him, then how us? Look what we've done! We've left everything to follow you!" They've fallen into the same trap as the man, they instantly start by pointing out what they've done, not who they've become. Jesus is like, "yeah, yeah, yeah, you'll get your rewards, that's not the point!"

It reminds me of the true story of the unbaptized arm:

During the 15th century, Ivan the Great had his hands full uniting warring tribes that would later form the Soviet Union. His attention to this distracted him from marrying and producing an heir. Since he didn't have the time to find a wife, he had his advisors search Europe for one. The daughter of the King of Greece was chosen, but with a caveat that Ivan become Greek Orthodox. Ivan agreed and a priest was sent to Moscow to teach him the understandings of the Orthodox Church. When his schooling was finished, Ivan and his 500 soldiers went to Greece for his baptism, which is done in the Eastern Orthodox Church by

full immersion. His loyal soldiers asked to be baptized too so they each received a crash-course in Orthodoxy. Crowds gathered by the thousands to see Ivan and his 500 soldiers be baptized. There was a problem though, their Church did not allow soldiers to be members. They'd have to relinquish their sword for the baptism. After a quick debate of diplomacy, an agreement was reached. So as the 500 soldiers with 500 priests began the ritual, the soldiers withdrew their swords, lifted it over their heads, and allowed all of themselves, besides for their arm and sword, to be baptized.

Is that how we're living our days? We give ourselves to God, wear the name Christian, well, all except this one part, this one thing. Which brings us back to our original question: what is God asking of us that we feel is too much, that seems impossible to do? God is not asking us to do anything but to surrender to the new life God wants to create within and through us. How can we "achieve"? What can we "do"? Nothing. "Then who can be saved? It's impossible with human beings, but not with God. All things are possible for God."