

Proper 23, Pentecost 20(B). October 11, 2015. Mark 10: 17-31.

Today is one of those Sundays when, across the country, preachers like me are pulling themselves into the pulpit in thousands of churches, looking out over the congregation, grimacing slightly, and launching into a learned discourse about how Jesus didn't really mean that crazy stuff that we just read. Or there may be just a few who, like us, are starting their annual giving campaign this week and are doing a quick calculation to see if when Jesus said "give all your money to the poor," there's any chance that he meant to include the church in that designation. I don't want to do either of those things this morning. Because I'm pretty sure that he did mean it, though I may not be totally clear about what he meant by it. And I am fully convinced that while part of the church's mission is to comfort us, the church can have no part in ensuring that we are comfortable.

I identify with this man who comes running to Jesus with a burning question. I think that we are supposed to identify with him—Mark doesn't give him a name, doesn't describe his age or appearance or where he's from. He is a blank, because he could be any of us. All we know about him at first is that he is sincere and that he is in earnest. Now usually, in Mark, when someone rushes up to Jesus, pushing through crowds to interrupt his trip, they are in dire need: they need to be healed or their relative is possessed by demons. But this guy is a little bit different. He doesn't seem to be in terrible physical distress. But he has a question that is burning a hole in him: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Perhaps our burning question, the question that would send us sprinting through a crowd of people to kneel before a stranger is different, but he does have a good question. Notice that that he isn't asking how to earn or win eternal life. Rather, the question is how to receive a gift that is on offer. How to be given life to its fullest now and in the future.

And Jesus' answer is fascinating. He basically says "You already know what to do." And he lists some of the ten commandments. I'm not sure if you've heard this before, but it's pretty common to divide the ten commandments into two sections. The first four commandments shape how we should relate to God: have no other gods before me; don't make any graven images; don't take the Lord's name in vain; and remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. And then the other six shape how we should relate to other people: honor your father and mother; don't kill; don't commit adultery; don't steal; don't bear false witness; and don't covet. What's fascinating is that in this passage in Mark, Jesus shows no interest in the first four commandments. He lists off the last six, substituting "You shall not defraud" for "You shall not covet."

Apparently the first step, if you want to have life at its holy fullest, is to relate justly to other people. Jesus cites the justice commandments as common knowledge—this is stuff we all know we have to do, and it's stuff that we should be able to do. But this guy has done all these things. His problem isn't that he is treating people unjustly. His problem is that he has done everything he knows to do . . . and there's still something missing.

Here's where I really relate to him, and I bet some of you do too. Maybe you've seen people for whom spirituality—or anything else—just seems easy. People who just have a knack for something that you desperately want. Maybe it's a marriage, or parenting. Your friends seem to do all the same stuff you do, and everything clicks, for them, exactly as it should. But for you, even after you've done all the right things, there's still something between you and your spouse, or your kid is still using up second chances as if they were incense at the Easter Vigil. Or maybe it is spirituality: you look around this room and it seems like it's easy for everyone else, while you're still waiting for some essential piece to click into place to make it all make sense.

I get that. That resonates with me on a deep, existential level. All my boxes are checked—but something’s still missing. This sermon probably won’t make the marriage click or the kid get his or her act together. But I do have complicated good news: “Jesus looked at him and loved him.” Because of all that camel and eye of a needle stuff, we think that this story is very harsh. But the turning point is here: in Jesus looking at and loving all of us who lack one thing. All of us who are trying our absolute best, and still knowing that we somehow haven’t gotten it right.

This guy doesn’t get condemned. He gets loved. It is because Jesus loves him that Jesus goes on to tell him what he’s missing. You lack one thing, and this is to give all. The Bible gives no indication that there are perfect disciples, but consistently the imperfection arises because we try to do discipleship piecemeal. Get good at this commandment, and then work on that commandment, and then the next one. All of these steps are good, but what we are lacking is giving our whole selves, which cannot be done piece by piece.

Now the path to life in its holy fullest still goes through justice. It is no accident that Jesus designates this guy’s money for the poor. It’s totally consistent with the edited list of commandments Jesus earlier gave. Following Jesus always means doing justice, and especially towards the poor. But I don’t think that Jesus is just telling this guy to “do justice harder.” I believe that the point is a matter of trust—removing those things that impede a radical trust in God. This is most often possessions, but it can be other things as well: good looks, talent, a skill, intelligence, family connections, or even our own righteousness. Any of these things that we are so tempted to put our trust in, rather than God.

It’s not that Jesus hates wealth. If that were the case, he wouldn’t be instructing this guy to make poor people wealthier. The instruction then would be to throw his money into the sea, rather than redistributing the problem to others. I think that the problem is that it is so darned difficult not to put our trust in the stuff *we have*, instead of in the God who *has us*. When Jesus assures this would-be disciple that after he gives away all his money, he’ll have treasure in heaven, he isn’t talking about a room full of gold beyond the stars that he’ll be able to swim in a la Scrooge McDuck. It’s that we will always put our trust where our stuff is—so Jesus is telling him to transfer that trust to God. And since you’re getting rid of the impediment to trusting God anyway, you might as well use it to help those in need.

So what are we called to do? We who lack *at least* one thing? First, remember that the path to life in its holy fullest always goes through treating other people justly and caring for the poor. Second, and probably the hardest: the one thing is almost always turning over our trust to God, rather than our things, our money, our connections, our abilities. What is it that we have, that is actually leading us to lack one thing? And finally, remember that God loves us whether we lack one thing or lack pretty much everything. In other words, how much we lack has nothing to do with how much we are loved.