

Mark 10:17-31

¹⁷As 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?" ¹⁸Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You 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.'" ²⁰He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." ²¹Jesus, 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." ²²When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. ²³Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" ²⁴And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It 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." ²⁶They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" ²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." ²⁸Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." ²⁹Jesus 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, ³⁰who 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. ³¹But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Last Sunday, October 4th, at least in the Catholic Church, was the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi. He is featured in much of our music today: *All Creatures of our God & King*, and in the anthem & hymn, *Make me a Channel of your Peace*. He is the reason we are celebrating the Blessing of the animals after worship today, and also the same one who brought us the tradition of the Creche, the Nativity scene. He began the religious order known as the Franciscans and became known for his love, simplicity, and practice of poverty.

Francis was baptized Giovanni, in Assisi, Italy in 1182. His father, Pietro, was a successful cloth merchant. Francis was raised in a wealthy, privileged and religiously observant family. He grew up with a love of fine clothes, enjoying good food, and dancing and good times. Francis joined the forces from Assisi in their fight against Perugia, another town in Italy. He returns to Assisi sick with a fever, accompanied by spiritual visions. The next time you are sick with fever, pay attention to whether you God visits you with Spiritual Visions. While praying in the chapel of Saint Damiano outside Assisi, he hears a voice from the crucifix, "*Francis, go repair my house, which is falling in ruins.*"

His lavish life from before the war no longer made sense, and he felt his soul being pulled toward a different way of living, a radical giving up of everything that would have been easily his, a turning away from the comfortable path that has been laid out before him. Francis was not just ill; in spite of his family's wealth, he was hungry and thirsty and lost. To the dismay of his father, he, sold his horse and some cloth from his father's shop, and came back to give the money to the priest at Saint Damiano. His father, furious that his son wasted his money on churches and beggars, took him before the bishop to bring him to his senses. When the hearing began, Francis took off all of his clothes (while promptly being covered by the Bishop with a cloak), renounced all his worldly possessions to live a simple life as a man of God, and walks off into the mountains to live among the poor as a beggar. He lived the rest of his life without money or family ties.

Francis loved nature; he spoke to the birds and the animals as though they were his friends. Francis felt the need to return to the original spirit of Christ. Living without materialistic attachments, and loving other people. A number of the young men of Assisi, joined him in his new way of life, and presented their ideas to Pope Innocent III. There is a great movie chronicling the life of St. Francis in Franco Zeffirelli's film, *Brother Sun and Sister Moon*.

The life of St. Francis is a contrast to the man in the Gospel of Mark this morning. We get the sense that the man in the gospel is also restless and haunted by a deep inner sense that something isn't quite complete about his life. When the man asks "*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*" He was *not* asking, "*What must I do to go to heaven when I die?*" He was asking, "*What must I do to enter the kingdom of God?*" The rich man stands in a place of privilege in his society, yet earnestly desires to live fully. Jesus probes his commitment by asking

about his practices, not about his beliefs: has he kept the commandments? He tells Jesus that he has kept all the commandments, but he is not satisfied; he is struggling with a deep hunger that tells him that there is even more to life than doing what is expected of him.

Commentators often criticize this character. We, too, could easily judge this man to be arrogant because he so quickly claims to have followed all the commandments. How many of us can claim the same thing? Where is his humility? This man has simply focused on doing what was expected of him as a faithful and observant Jew. He is sincere and serious, kneeling before Jesus and addressing him as "good teacher." Mark portrays him humbly asking an authentic question. What does he need to do in order to join Jesus' reforming movement to bring the world back to the practice of God's intentions for the world?

Jesus is opening a door to the next stage, a deeper step, on this man's journey of faith. He "*looked steadily at him and loved him,*" and tells him: "*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.*" This was one of the stories that converted Francis of Assisi. The observation that he still lacks "one thing" is not meant to indicate that there is one more task he can perform to earn salvation. Jesus' answer essentially boils down to saying "*There is nothing you can do to make sure God will reward you.*"

Jesus tells him that the way to "eternal life" leads through discipleship and issues the invitation to deeper discipleship. Jesus apparently liked what he saw in this man - he saw the potential to do more: to become more. "*Come, follow me,*" Jesus invites.

After hearing what it cost to be a disciple, the man doesn't weigh his options and then decide that returning to his wealth and possessions is the better choice. He knows in his heart what Jesus says is true. The man slumps down and walks away sorrowfully as he returns to that which he has not found satisfying all along. This is the only call story in the gospels in which someone refuses to follow Jesus.

As much as he hungers for life, he's not yet willing to sell all that he has for the sake of the kingdom of God. What Jesus asked was too much. The man was willing to do more, almost anything Jesus would have asked, but he was unable to do with less. It would not just be the riches, but the lifestyle they permitted - the comfort, security, fine food and the admiration of others. And what would he be giving it up for?

We do not know what became of him. The narrator does not add, "*and he lived unhappily ever after...*" We are free to wonder. The story is left open-ended. Perhaps, in the days that followed, he changed his mind, just as we might re-think our own lives, and listen to that same call to come, follow Jesus. Maybe, like Francis of Assisi, he found a way to follow the Master, the path of Jesus.

Many people will look at this story, and see it only as one that deals with wealth and materialism. And there are certainly many jokes to back that perception:

*They say it is better to be poor and happy than rich and miserable,
but how about a compromise like moderately rich and just moody?*

A boy has just heard this passage and is contemplating it late at night. He goes in to wake his mother: "Mom, Jesus says that rich people don't go to heaven!" The mother instantly replies:

"We are not rich. Go back to bed!"

*A child's hand is stuck in a vase. The parent had trouble getting the hand out. The child asks,
"Would it be easier if I let go of the penny?"*

These verses do address wealth and materialism, but more than that, I think these verses address our attachments, whatever they may be. Jesus does not condemn wealth and possessions *per se*; rather his focus is on one's attachments, and how our attachment affects our commitment to God. Jesus did not ask everyone he met to give away all they had - Zacchaeus being one example. When Jesus says "*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.*" He may well have been referring to the image of gate in ancient Jerusalem (or some scholars say Jericho) called "*The Eye of the Needle,*" which was so narrow that a camel couldn't get through it unless the packs it was carrying were

removed, at which point it could get through laboriously on its knees. Perhaps it is more about our approach to God with humility and letting go of that which we cling to so tightly, just like the child with penny clutched in his hand.

Transformation requires practice of nonattachment, of letting go. When Jesus asks to give away possessions it is not to reduce him to a state of poverty. It is to free him to be fully committed to God, to follow Jesus. The secret to entering the realm of God is to follow Jesus' Way: heal the sick, eat with the poor, act with justice & compassion. There is not necessarily any reward later. The reward is living in the kingdom here and now.

How many of us would have reacted any differently than this man in the Gospel lesson today? The word of God is incisive and probing. It leaves our inner being naked and exposed. If God gazed into our hearts, what would be discovered? Before God "*no creature is hidden.*"

At the very least this passage calls us to examine carefully where our priorities lie and to consider what it would mean to give more of what is most dear to us, whether is our money, our time, or our status in the community. But many things can block our participation in the Reign of God. Our own comfort and luxuries may indeed be obstacles to living into the Reign of God. Perhaps it would be "*easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle*" than for some of us to forgive those who have harmed us. Well-nurtured anger and bitterness can settle into our hearts for so long that we cannot imagine ourselves without them, even for the sake of life with God. Pride, jealousy or envy prevent some of us from knowing the life God wants to share with us; for others it's excessive ambition, relentless self-promotion or an obsession with success. For others it may be deeply held opinions or judgments. Deeper discipleship begins when the one thing that holds us back is renounced and all its claims upon us are dissolved.

It is a challenge not only to deal with those things that stand in the way of making a full commitment to God, but also to consider how our choices help to bring about justice in the world, how we help to bring in the kingdom of God. May we follow the path that Jesus' offered. Amen.