

October 14, 2018

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Mark 10:17-31

## Impossible

We're in the midst of our Fall Stewardship campaign. When you hear a sermon begin that like that you may want to do what the man in today's gospel did: high tail it out. Something about money, mentioning it overtly like that, can have that effect. It can make us uncomfortable. I feel uncomfortable starting the sermon with, "We're in the midst of our Fall Stewardship campaign." And when choosing cover art for the bulletin, thematic options were: a bag of coins, or children around a Bible. We went with children around a Bible. Money is a topic we may prefer to avoid, especially in church, which, actually, is difficult to do, because the Bible has a lot to say about money.

It felt impossible not to mention that, since it is Bible Sunday: the Bible, and Jesus in particular, mention money quite a bit. It's featured in almost half of Jesus' almost forty parables, and he has lots of sayings about it, including the one we heard today about a camel and the eye of a needle. I was thinking, as an illustration, I should bring down Malachi, the papier-mâché camel that lives upstairs in the Sunday School rooms, I should have him come to church today. (He usually comes only once a year, for Epiphany). I was thinking I should bring down old Malachi the camel and then hold a needle up next to him to make Jesus' illustration that much more vivid, but Malachi's size makes him a little tricky to move—and he's not even full grown! Still, how impossible it would be, to squeeze our papier-mâché camel through the eye of a needle. How impossible it is, for the wealthy, to enter the kingdom of heaven. How impossible it is, what Jesus asks this man in today's gospel story to do: to sell everything he owns, give all the proceeds the poor, and then come follow him. Impossible.

The man can't. There's something uncomfortable about this, too, that this is how this interaction between Jesus and this unnamed man ends, with the guy high-tailing it out, getting out of there, walking away, grieving. He had many possessions. He couldn't do what Jesus asked. He couldn't get rid of his things and follow. Being Bible Sunday, another bit of Bible Trivia: in Mark's gospel, this is the only person whom Jesus calls to follow, who does not. In all other cases in Mark, when Jesus says, "Follow me," the person drops their nets, leaves their father, leaves their tax booth, becomes his disciple. But not this guy. His attachment to his possessions prevents it. He's not a bad guy—he doesn't kill people, or steal, or lie. He's good to his parents. He's not a bad guy, he just has a lot of stuff.

Maybe we can relate to that. We may have a fair amount of things, even if we're not "rich." We have to admit that the definition of wealth is, after all, something of a sliding scale. For the most part, what counts as "rich" is determined by comparison—and there's always someone who has more than we do. We may also know that one can live paycheck to paycheck—when paychecks are large, as well as when they are small. Perhaps we also know that we can have a lot of stuff and still be poor, still feel poor, still feel as if we are not living as we should, materially, existentially. We may know about that.

Jesus knows about that, about us. Jesus knows about this unnamed man in today's gospel, that though this guy seemed to have everything, he was lacking something. Jesus says, "You are lacking one thing." The man himself knows this, too—it's why he went to see Jesus. He felt a lack in his life, so he sought out the Lord. This is a very good move on his part! He

had a good life, but somehow it wasn't enough, so he went to see a good teacher.

"Why do you call me good?" Jesus asks. I think Jesus must have had his eyebrows raised when he said this. "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." The irony is so rich here, Jesus himself being God. "No one is good," Jesus says, foreshadowing the man's impending inability, his human lack, the impossibility of what he will be asked to do. Jesus knows, he is perceptive, sharp, as the book of Hebrews puts it, "the word of God is a two edged sword, piercing the heart." Jesus knows what the man is missing and so gives him a heart-piercing directive: Get rid of all your stuff. Don't hang on to a single thing. Sell it all, shed it all, give the proceeds to the poor, then follow me.

It's a high demand, a hard demand, but it is not heartless—the very opposite. This is clear in what comes just before it. Before Jesus gives his impossible directive, the Bible says "Jesus looked at the man, and loved him." Another piece of Bible Trivia, in all of Mark, this man is the only person singled out as being loved by Jesus. Jesus tells the man to get rid of all his stuff out of love. Because he loves him, Jesus wants the man to leave a life of acquiring, for a life of giving. Because he loves him, Jesus wants the man to leave a life of obtaining, for a life of offering. Jesus wants this for him, because Jesus loves him.

And the man cannot do what Jesus says. The man cannot walk away from his stuff. Instead, he walks away from God. And then Jesus goes on to talk about camels. And Peter gets defensive about all he has given up. And Jesus tells Peter that giving is not a competitive sport. Jesus says to Peter and the other disciples, Jesus says to all followers of all times and places, that there are blessings, and abundance even now, the kingdom is ours, right now, it's all ours—and persecutions, too. More foreshadowing: we are not far from the end of Mark's gospel, not far the persecution Jesus himself will endure, not far from the cross, the execution of a poor man whose words about goodness—and money—were a threat to the world as humanly ordered, not far from the ultimate persecution of God himself. In the cross, Jesus will give up everything for an impoverished humanity. In the cross, Jesus will give it all up, for all of us, out of love.

We don't know what happened to this man with all the stuff, but there is another reference to an unnamed guy near the end of Mark's gospel, just before the cross. More Bible Trivia: this detail only occurs only in Mark, and no one knows exactly what to make of it, this mention of a man, who, when Jesus is arrested in the garden of Gethsemane, is also there. Mark's gospel says that this man was "following Jesus," and that after they seized Jesus, this man "fled, naked, leaving his garment behind."

Isn't it weird that Mark mentions that? Sort of makes you uncomfortable. Who is this Biblical stalker? Some have wondered: what if it's that guy who had all the stuff? It's not impossible. What if this guy, who, when he first met Jesus, walked away grieving, what if this guy found that he could not shake the loving gaze of God? What if, having been seen by God, loved by God, what if in the shadow of the cross he did follow? He followed, shedding, shaking off all that he had, even his clothes?

We could be him. We could be that unnamed follower. (We could keep our clothes on.) It is possible we are wealthier than we know. God loves us, and does the impossible for us, God makes the impossible possible for us. It is possible to live lives of generosity. It is possible to be good stewards of what we've been given: our time, our possessions, our earth. It is possible to know what richness really is. By God, it is possible. Amen.