



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, OCTOBER 14, 2018
AMOS 5:6-7, 10-15; PSALM 90:12-17; HEBREWS 4:12-16; MARK 10:17-31

POWER PLAY

Early in our marriage, Chris and I would visit my in-laws regularly. One of the things I remember from their house was this wooden credenza. It was the kind designed to hold (and hide!) record players and 8-track tape decks, stereo speakers, and any number of other household accessories. This particular piece of furniture was huge: at least as long as the altar table in the nave and about half the width it. Despite its size, it was tucked away in a corner almost invisible to us, that is, until one quiet, winter evening.

That night, we sat on the sofa watching television and soaking up the warmth from a fire. All of the sudden, we noticed something dart across the floor. Then we noticed it scurry into the credenza. Then, we realized what it was: a mouse! Apparently, the credenza was large

enough to house at least one small mammal, too.

In an instant, the quiet scene transformed into chaos. This once invisible piece of furniture quickly turned into the sole focus of our attention. As we ran around in state of panic, my mother-in-law said something I'll never forget. She accused the credenza of being "albatross around her neck." Then muttered something about how she couldn't wait for the day to ditch it.

Today, we hear another story about possessions and the space those possessions take up in our lives. A person runs up to and kneels before Jesus. He asks Jesus what to do to obtain eternal life. It's a question we all wonder about, what this elusive, wonderful, confusing idea of life with God is about.

So, when Jesus responds, people lean in and listen very carefully:

Go, sell that you have, give the money to the poor ... and come back. Then you will be ready to follow me. Then you will know what eternal life is about.

When Jesus is done, not only is the person shocked, so are his disciples and many of us, too.

At one level, this is a commentary about possessions. First century Palestine, like today, had its own forms of prosperity theology. For many of Jesus's contemporaries, possessions were sign of favor with God. The greater the number of possessions, the greater God's blessing on a person.

But such theologies, like any belief system, have their own shadow sides. It doesn't take long to veer off into a twisted reality where worship of God takes a backseat to the worship of stuff. Nor is it a stretch to begin believing we curry special favor with God at the expense of others, or that our own doing yields our own salvation.

These were the kinds of ideas Jesus worked hard to change. When Jesus encounters the person, he takes advantage of another teaching moment and issues the challenge. Jesus expected all of his followers to take up their own crosses. But Jesus also knew something about crosses:

they are hard to hold when your hands are full of other things.

There is more.

The encounter was not just a rant against possessions or a reminder about carrying crosses. When Jesus issues the challenge, he confounds the person, on purpose, to turn this person's world upside down and inside out.

Jesus knew what the other was about to discover. Something else held power over this person's life. Until that could be acknowledged, eternal life would remain an elusive and frustrating concept. Until then, transformation would remain just as elusive and frustrating.

When Jesus responds, the text says Jesus looks at the person. But this is no ordinary glance. Instead, the Greek gives us the clue. This is a deep, searching stare. It is a kind of gaze that bores deep into the recesses of a person's soul and whispers: *What are your intentions? What's getting in the way of your walk with God? What holds power in your life?*

When the person is confronted by Jesus, it stops the person short. In an instant, the person's idea of eternal life is upended. Discipleship no longer becomes about following the rules or joining a countercultural movement. Instead, discipleship becomes about letting go all

that has hold of a person's life and letting God take care of the rest.

Like the person, every one of us has a myriad of concerns that lay claim on us. It might be stubborn certitude that walls us off, cutting off new possibilities. It could be doubt so deep it paralyzes us, causing us to question every decision we make and our very worthiness. For some, the pain caused by a loss, or an illness, or a ruptured relationship is all a person can bear. ...and yes, for many of us including me, money asserts a claim on our lives that is hard to shake. Until all of those claims are laid bare in front of us, each one continues to trap us in an unrelinquishing grip.

Like the person, Jesus makes his plea to each of us. He asks each of us to reflect and name the powers that bind us. He asks not to condemn us but out of an abundance of compassion for us. This is what the way of love is for Jesus: an ongoing invitation to realign every aspect of life with the way of God.

That transformation will be liberating, and it will also difficult. When the crusty layers that surround our souls are exposed, it will be uncomfortable. Those layers gain power over us by coloring our worldview and the narratives we tell ourselves about the world, about each other, and about God. Those layers gain

power over us by masking themselves as our deepest longings. Those layers become second nature to us. ...and yet, those layers are not who and what God has made us to be.

Eventually, when we are ready and with God's help, those layers will give way. Then we come face-to-face with what really matters. It will probably be startling and disorienting, at least for a little while. While it is unsettling, it is also beginning. It is the moment when we finally set free by the Holy Spirit to be who and what God has created us to be.

That's the moment when we cross the threshold into transformation.

That's when we'll begin to know what eternal life is about.

By now, most of you know we are in that regular, unofficial liturgical season known as "the Stewardship Season," or as some like to call it "the annual begathon." The theme for this year's campaign is based on spiritual practices outlined by Presiding Bishop Michael Curry at this year's General Convention. When the annual giving committee picked the "The Way of Love" as the theme, we did so because annual giving is one of those spiritual practices.

At one level, annual giving is a begathon. It is about the reality of raising money to

support the mission and ministry of Saint Mark's for the upcoming year. Annual giving is about something else, too: it is about a spiritual practice, and like any spiritual practice, that makes annual giving another threshold for transformation. This year, imagine how your own giving might be an invitation to let go, and trust that somehow, in the letting go, God will meet you where we are, rejoice for the encounter, and then draw you more deeply into life with God.

Trust that transformation is possible. Trust that the worldly powers that try to claim you are not of God. Trust that through your baptism, you are claimed forever as a member of the household of God. Trust that when you look in the reflecting pool, the face of a beloved child of God will be gazing back at you. Trust and let God do the rest.

AMEN.

Mark 10:17-31 *[As Jesus 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?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 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.'" He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." 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." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.*

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

Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." 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, 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. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."]