



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON EMILY GRIFFIN, CANON VICAR
THE TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, OCTOBER 13, 2024
AMOS 5:6-7, 10-15; PSALM 90:12-17; HEBREWS 4:12-16; 4:4-7; MARK 10:17-31

REMOVING THE BLINDERS

One of the best pieces of advice I've ever been given is the following: "Don't ask questions you don't want the answers to." Part of me wishes that someone would have given this wise counsel to the man in today's Gospel. He asks Jesus a real question, and now the rest of us have to live with the answer. Of course, our version of this question might not use words like "eternal life." Ours might be, "What should I do to have an impact that will outlast me? How can I know that I am part of something sturdier than my loved ones' memories? How can I act on my hopes for the future instead of my fears?" But this man uses the language he has. "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus, being Jesus, doesn't answer the question directly at first. He starts by listing the commandments, a kind of lowest common denominator morality. "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Since we know the outcome of the story, it's tempting to look for self-righteousness here, to assume this man is either lying or deliberately deluding himself. But the text doesn't say that. Tragically, it's the man's very integrity, his refusal to make a promise he can't keep, that leads him to walk away before he hears the rest of the story.

It's here that Mark, our Gospel writer, adds a critical detail. We're told: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him." Jesus' next statement, then, is not a "gotcha" meant to

shame him or trip him up. Love then meant what it means now; Jesus seeks this man's good. He says: "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." While it is a call to action, it's also the beginning of a conversation; it doesn't need to be the end. But the man walks away before he can learn that.

Jesus then says, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God."

Isn't wealth a sign of God's blessing on all our hard work? That's what the late-night televangelists say. If we just work hard enough, we'll be rewarded with prosperity. But if that's true, then why does Jesus view wealth as a hindrance? Wealth certainly has its benefits. When we can pay our bills, we're able to focus on something other than money. Funny how it doesn't always work that way, though. Many of us either focus our best efforts on gaining what we don't have, or we insist on maintaining what we do have at the expense of our spiritual lives and social

witness. Either way, we're enslaved by what is supposed to give us freedom.

But Jesus isn't romanticizing sheer deprivation either. Poverty is a scourge, not an inherent virtue. Jesus' point here is not to eliminate wealth but to allow everyone to have enough. In the world we live in, wealth can bring safety and stability and access to justice. Everyone should have these things. Wealth can provide us with opportunities to learn and explore; it can expose us to a larger world and give us a greater sense of our responsibilities to each other. It can even allow us to contribute meaningfully to communities like this one whose impact on the world will far outlast us. It can do all these things; it doesn't always.

We all know of examples where wealth doesn't deliver on its promises. Wealth is no guarantee against violence or illness. It can skew how we see ourselves; we can lose a sense of who we are apart from what we earn. And we definitely know people whose wealth has blinded them and, rather than broadening their sense of responsibility, it has allowed them to become incredibly self-absorbed. That

could be the greatest danger of wealth – not that it offers us too much, but that it shields us from too much by isolating us from fellow children of God who could open our eyes to the effects of our consumption on each other and the world around us.

Wealth can also blind us to the radical demands of the Gospel - because it allows us to give to others out of sheer abundance and then, like the man in this story, be shocked with real sacrifice is asked of us. By blinding us to our own dependence on others, wealth can prevent us from seeing when awareness is not enough and sacrificial giving is actually called for. It can allow us to believe the illusion of self-sufficiency and discount the sacrifices others have made to bring us where we are – and therefore, the sacrifices that are asked of us as followers of Christ to make a more equitable future for all.

So then, if poverty scars us and wealth blinds us, what are we left with? Or as the disciples put it, “Then who can be saved?”

I wish the man in today’s Gospel had stuck around long enough to hear Jesus’ full answer. “For mortals, it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” The good news is that eternal life in the presence of a loving, gracious God is not dependent on our virtue - or on our generosity. Wealth cannot buy it, and poverty cannot take it away. We can and should give sacrificially to communities like this one where our impact can be channeled and magnified for generations to come – not to buy our way into eternal life, but in gratitude for the fact that it’s already ours. What this looks like, of course, will differ for each of us, but the call to give – and to give up our blinders - remains. What might be God calling you to let go of? What’s blocking your view? Remember, this is the beginning of a conversation; it doesn’t need to be the end. My best advice – stick around long enough to hear what comes next. In the Name of the One who loves us too much to ask any less of us. 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.”]



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