

October 10, 2021

Mark 10:17-31

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I'm sure you've seen the pictures and heard about it: 50 or so cargo ships, idling miles off the coast of LA, waiting to have their containers unloaded. The same thing is happening at the ports in Savannah and New York/New Jersey. Business folks estimate that there are about 500,000 containers, filled with everything from toys to bikes to holiday decorations just waiting to get into the U.S. and get to the American consumer. Several things have contributed to the problem, like order backlogs from 2020, Covid protocols, and labor shortages, including a shortage of truck drivers.

It is a problem that has economic ramifications, but it's interesting how it has been reported, isn't it? The headline to the story might as well have been "Will we get what we want?!"

Dire warnings about Christmas toys and artificial tree shortages has led to this kind of advice: "If you see what you want now for the holidays, if you know what your kids want, you better just buy it, because there might not be anything left later." Let the games begin...(And yes, Costco is again limiting how much toilet paper we can buy at one time.)

"Will we get what we want?!"

What do you think the man who came running to Jesus wanted? He doesn't just run to Jesus, he kneels in front of him--in Mark's Gospel this is always the posture of someone who comes asking for healing. So was this man struggling, wrestling with something in his life that he couldn't fix, couldn't make peace with? It sounds like it, doesn't it? "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

In other words: How do I know that I've done enough, been good enough so I get to be part of God's kingdom? Jesus lists six of the ten commandments and the man is sure he can check all those boxes. Do you see him, earnestly pleading: "tell me, just tell me, and I'll do it"? And do you see Jesus, looking at him and seeing this struggling child of God and loving him, just loving him in all his messy sincerity?

Does Jesus know that what is said next will cause the man to crumple in sorrow? “You lack one thing: go, sell what you own, give the money to the poor--you will have treasure in heaven--then come, follow me.” It was too much. There was no way he could do it. The verse says “he had many possessions,” but it was more than that, don’t you think? He had standing, status in the community--he was important. His possessions would have included servants and also likely slaves--he controlled things and people. He had planned and worked hard for all he had. To let go and give it all up? No way.

It’s not surprising that this is one of the most analyzed encounters in Jesus’ ministry. How commentators and preachers and people in the pews have tried to make what Jesus says manageable: Jesus didn’t mean giving *everything* away, it’s an exaggeration...this is just for this guy in the Bible, it’s not directed at us...this is only for rich people, and I’m *definitely* not rich...

A sure sign of Jesus’ words hitting close to home is when we try to edit them to our liking. This Word of God is a sharp sword, as Hebrews says this morning, cutting through all our distortions.

Most of us have enough: enough money, enough clothes, enough food, and a place to live. And many of us have *more than* enough: investments, retirement accounts, nice homes, vacations, and the ability to make so many choices about how we live. If we are honest, we know that we have it better than a huge percentage of the world’s population. We have everything.

And yet Jesus has the audacity to say to us this morning “You lack. You are lacking.” How does Jesus know? Well, remember that phrase Jesus uses in the Sermon on the Mount? “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Jesus knows something about us: that our treasure is so often misplaced so that we value possessions and a sense of control above most everything else.

The love and the investment of ourselves that we give to those ‘treasures’ convicts us today. We lack trust in God and we lack generosity. Maybe you know that about yourself today; you know the struggle between wanting to let go and extend what you’ve been given and the need to hang on and preserve what is yours.

Jesus' disciples knew that struggle, saw it enacted in the man who came running and so they ask incredulously "Then who can be saved?" (healed from that captivity) "For people, it is impossible," says Jesus. "But not for God; for God, all things are possible." There's that trust thing again: only God's love for us in Christ and our surrender to it makes it possible for us to trust that there is abundance and we can be generous. As we said last week, learning that trust and to give are central to following Jesus, who pours out love again and again in abundance.

Last week you heard Michael Z. speak and this morning we heard Ryan--what worship/music, what growing in faith in this place means to them. And the amazing truth is there's always more to it than what happens because of our giving--giving also changes *us*. It doesn't have to be a reluctant look at that giving chart in the bulletin this morning, and foot-dragging all the way. Giving can become a joyful act--letting go because we recognize that it's all a gift from God anyway. It changes the way we choose to live, what our priorities are, and it makes deep joy possible--for you and for our congregation.

Surrounded by the anxiety of "Will we get what we want?!" we can live instead with peace and joy.