

## Sermon – March 1, 2020

### One Thing You Lack

Text: Mark 10: 17-22

Jesus strikes again with a difficult bargain in today's story. Literal reading of this story certainly offers discomfort to many of us. At first, this seems like a story that tells us exactly how to earn a spot in heaven. Follow all the commandments and give everything to the poor. Done! But not too fast. I think there is something we need to unearth in this story. Something we need to learn and understand when we move beyond its literal interpretation.

So a rich man approaches Jesus. Despite his wealth, being good, and doing all the right things he just can't seem to get it right. He falls on his knees and implores Jesus to answer his question: *what must I do to inherit eternal life?* This man no doubt is an heir. He inherited most of what he owned from his ancestors. He was born with a silver spoon in his mouth and have never experienced hunger, homelessness or any physical discomfort. What made most people rich in those days was owning property. We can assume that when Mark says "he had many possessions" he meant that he had "many properties". And we know that most wealthy landowners in those days became wealthier by acquiring the land of their debt-defaulting neighbours, so it is reasonable to assume that one who had "many properties" had become wealthy at other people's expense. He was a Jew no doubt, who was able to exercise his religion, in the occupying Roman Empire. Mark was written at a time when the Roman rule was becoming more and more oppressive, about to reach its culmination in the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Many of the affluent Jewish people lived comfortable lives but lacked compassion and concern for the vast number of people suffering physical and spiritual poverty. Into such a world Jesus challenged the status quo and sent it reeling. And now this rich man in our story was born into such socio-political system. He has heard of eternal life through rabbinic teachings but he doesn't know how to attain it. He thought that eternal life is something that one could inherit.

Eternal life – is that something we all aim for? What is your personal understanding of eternal life? A traditional biblical interpretation of eternal life alludes to going to heaven when

we die – that place where God and good people dwell forever. In the Jewish mindset, eternal life is known as “lasting life” or “a life of eternity” that refers to living a life focused on matters of eternal importance. I certainly like this definition but I see eternal life not in futuristic term but in the present tense - as life lived here and now. I believe that each one of us is gifted with matters of eternal importance like goodness that allows us to be advocates and practitioners of love, kindness, compassion justice and peace. The result of living these values will have an eternal impact to others and the world. Take for example the life of heroes and heroines like Terry Fox, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa and many others. Their life of goodness and influence will always be remembered for many generations to come. They have lived lives of eternal importance and made a difference in the world. Ian Howes at our lectionary group last Tuesday said, “perhaps, the rich man asked the wrong question. Instead of saying what must I do to inherit eternal life, his question and ours should be: how can I find meaning in life?”

Mark’s Jesus edits the commandments for this man’s benefit. Jesus did not include the first five commandments that pertains to loving and following God. I think Jesus already know that this man was a pious, religious man. He knows his laws by heart and he’s a faithful practitioner of the purity laws. Jesus mentions the rest of the commandments - those pertaining to loving your neighbours. Do not murder; Do not commit adultery; Do not steal; Do not bear false witness; Do not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’ When the man claims to have *obeyed* all these laws, including this new commandment not to *defraud*, Jesus says, “Fine. *Prove* it. There is one thing you lack; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” I don’t know about you but when I first read Jesus’ mandate, I was wrestling whether to take this literally or otherwise. Remember John Lennon’s song *Imagine* – the part that says - “Imagine no possessions, I wonder if you can?” When he wrote this song, Lennon had billions in his pockets and several mansions. I wonder if he’s singing about himself? Well, just imagine giving up your source of income, your job. Imagine selling your house, your car and giving away the proceeds to strangers. Imagine giving away the contents of your closet – your clothes, your shoes, your jewelry. Imagine selling this church building and donating everything to charity. How do you feel about this? Who in his or her right mind would sell everything, give up all their possessions and give them all to the poor? Not me. You see, I would

like to live a life of comfort where I can enjoy life. I don't think Jesus is asking us to be beggars and mendicants for him. I think there is a better way of understanding this story. Maybe the question isn't simply about belief, but a disconnect between faith and practice ...or *how* or *whether* we translate our faith into commitments and into actions.

The rich man knows his commandments and practice them faithfully but he is not fulfilled. He is searching for meaning in his life. Why? Because he was living in his own comfortable silo. He doesn't see the socio-political conditions that trample the poor and the needy. Jesus calls him to totally turn his individualistic familiar life upside down, to give up his way of living and follow Jesus' way of life. Perhaps Jesus saw how he was burdened by his own personal discontentment despite of his wealth and Jesus wants to offer him freedom. Freedom from having society determine his value by the privilege his wealth affords...rather than the quality of his relationships. Freedom from the isolation caused by not knowing and loving and learning from those living without privilege, without wealth in a world that so profoundly builds a wall between the rich and the poor. Freedom from fear, that devours the soul, by placing our security and future and purpose...solely on our own shoulders - a weight that we cannot and should not bear alone. Perhaps Jesus means this: Go and *dismantle* the system that has made you *rich at the expense of others*. Let go of the materialism that is despoiling your soul. Break the barriers that are crippling you to experiencing life in its fulness. Move out from your comfort zones and share what you have so others may live comfortably like you. A theologian said that "heaven's treasures is ours only when we take steps to do something about the way the goods of the earth are unequally distributed."

Mark ends his story by telling us that the young man went away grieving. Did he go home and do what Jesus said? Did he look at all his stuff and say, "This isn't worth it" and give it all away? We don't know. Mark didn't tell us. And that's a good thing, because it forces us to step into that rich man's shoes and ask "what would I do if I were him?" What is it that causes you, like the rich man in the story, to turn away, sorrowful and grieving, when invited to turn your world upside down? Like the rich man, we all have possessions. We are all attached to things that fill the aching void in our hearts and in our spirit. I think it is time to break free – not just

from greed of money and wealth...but break free from something sinister...the corrupting influence of the world that values a closed hand more than an open hand...break free from a world that wrongly equates wealth with security...a world that values like-mindedness over engaging and learning from diversity and difference. Break free and follow Jesus's ways of radical love.

As we gather around the table of grace, it is time to rethink our relationship with our wealth and resources, yes, including our time and talents. We need to reconsider how we spend our resources and with whom we spend our time. We need to re-evaluate how we determine the value of our own and other's lives. The invitation to follow Jesus remains before us. And, in this Season of Lent, let us consider how we can put this story into practice and acknowledge what sort of radical transformation in our own lives might be nudging us to respond. When you do, you might even find the answer to the question about eternal life. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Sources:

The BCUC Lectionary Group

Rev. Miles Brandon, Sermon on Mark 10: 17-31, St. Julian of Norwich Episcopal Church.