

What Only God Can Do Mark 10:17-31

Most of us know this story of the rich young ruler, although Mark is the only one who suggests he is rich, Matthew is the only one who says he is young, and Luke is the only one who calls him a ruler. The fact that he shows up in all three of these gospels is a pretty good indication that his story is important, although most of us wish that he had never shown up at all. Because of him, we have one of the hardest sayings in the whole Bible, one that strikes fear in the hearts of would-be Christians everywhere: “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

Mark does not say right off that the man is rich, but you can tell. Not because he has good manners, running up and kneeling at Jesus’ feet, or because he addresses Jesus so grandly once he is there - “Good teacher” - but because of the question he asks. What must I do to inherit eternal life?” It is a rich man’s question, posed by someone whose bills are paid, whose income is secure, someone who is not preoccupied by lesser questions such as, “Where can I find a job?” or “How can I feed my family?” This man is free of those particular concerns. He does not have to spend his days trying to make ends meet in this life; he is free to pursue the good-life-to-come, secure in the knowledge that he is one of God’s chosen people.

Because that is one of the things that wealth meant in his day. Not if it was gotten unfairly, of course. If wealth was gotten by lies and meanness, then it was no better than poison for those who had it. But if it was gotten fairly, by honest means, then it was seen as a sign of God's blessing. Bestowing wealth on people was one of the ways God freed them from the daily grind in order to serve the Lord. So this man approaches Jesus with no shame about his great possessions. If anything, they are his credentials, the very things that give him the right to ask his question in the first place.

But Jesus is not impressed. Looking down at the man kneeling before him, he sees someone who is clearly above average and who works hard to stay that way, someone who wants to achieve as much in heaven as he has achieved on earth and who will do whatever is required of him to add eternal life to the list of things that are his. Maybe the man hopes he will be asked to buy shoes for every man, woman, and child in Palestine or, better yet, to throw dustcovers over his furniture and put his furs in storage while he accompanies Jesus on his travels. He is an extraordinary man who wants an extraordinary assignment, but Jesus will not cooperate.

“You know the commandments,” Jesus says, and reels off half of them. Do not do this, do not do that. Honor your father and your mother. Any first-grader could have recited the rest. It is the most ordinary answer imaginable, the ABC's of everyday life on earth.

But since the man wants something he can do, then that is something for him to do, same as for everyone else. But the man says, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth,” and Jesus loves him, just like that, which is proof that the man did not say it pompously or impatiently. He said it, instead, like a confession: I have kept the Law all my life, which is how I know it is not enough. I have amassed great wealth, which is how I know that is not enough either. I am a rich man, rich in things, rich in respectability, rich in obedience to the Law. That is how I know none of these things is enough to give me the life I want. What must **I** do to inherit eternal life, the kind of life that lasts?

No wonder Jesus loves him. He is ripe. He is ready for God. He has come to the end of what he can do for himself. He has come to the end of what his church and his society can do for him. All that is left for him to do is kneel at the feet of Jesus with eyes like stars and ask him what to do. So Jesus looks at him, really looks at him, and he loves what he sees: a true seeker, who has kept God’s word and his own, who had translated his beliefs into a life of genuine obedience to God. And who knows there is more, and who knows whom to ask about it.

But Jesus does more than look at the man. He looks into him, deeply, like a doctor making a diagnosis. He looks inside of him to see what the matter is, where the problem is, and what is the right medicine to heal it up again. Jesus looks at him aching to make him whole. Then he chooses his healing words with care.

“You lack one thing,” Jesus says, and surely the man’s heart jumped for joy. At last! Someone who sees past what he has to what he lacks and who will help him find what he is missing. Whatever it is, he will do it. Whatever it costs, he will pay it. Whatever it requires of him, he will earn it. He will do anything to add the prize of eternal life to his treasury, only it turns out not to be a matter of addition but subtraction.

“Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven,” Jesus says to him tenderly, “then come, follow me,” It is a rich prescription for a rich man, designed to melt the lump in his throat and the knot in his stomach by dissolving the burden on his back. It is an invitation to become smaller and more agile by closing his accounts on earth and opening one in heaven. It is a dare to him to become a new creature, defined in a new way, to trade in all the words that have described him up to now – wealthy, committed, cultured, responsible, educated, powerful, obedient – to trade them all in on one radically different word - which is free.

It seems to me that Christians mangle this story in at least two ways. First, by acting as if it were not about money, and second, by acting as if it were only about money. It is about money. As far as Jesus is concerned, money is like a nuclear power. It may be able to do a lot of good in the world, but only within strongly built and carefully regulated people. Most of us do not know how to handle money.

We get contaminated by its power, and we contaminate others by wielding it carelessly ourselves ---- by wanting it too desperately or believing in it too fiercely. Every now and then someone manages to use it well, but the odds of that are about as good as they are of pressing a camel through the eye of a needle. The story of the rich young ruler is a story about money.

But it is not a story that is only about money, because if it were then we could all buy our ways into heaven by cashing in our chips right now and you know that is not so. None of us earns eternal life, no matter what we do. We can keep the commandments until we are blue in the face; we can sign our paychecks over to Good Shepherd and rattle tin cups for our supper without earning a place at God's banquet table. The kingdom of God is not for sale. The poor cannot buy it with their poverty any more than the rich can buy it with their riches. The kingdom of God is God's consummate gift.

The catch is, you have got to be free to receive the gift. You cannot be otherwise engaged. You cannot be tied up right now, or too tied down to respond. You cannot accept God's gift if you have no spare hands to take it with. You cannot make room for it if all your rooms are already full. You cannot follow if you are not free to go.

That is why the rich young ruler went away sorrowful, if you ask me; he understood all at once that he was not free. His wealth was supposed to make him free, but kneeling before Jesus he understood that it was not so.

Invited to follow, he went away sorrowful instead, for he had great possessions that he lugged behind him like a ball and chain. He is the only person in the whole Gospel of Mark who walks away from an invitation to follow; he is the only wounded one who declines to be healed. Poverty scared him more than bondage. He could not believe that the opposite of rich might not be poor, but free.

“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!’” They were amazed at his words, positively astonished by them, Mark says. Jesus was challenging the social order, turning it upside down. Those who love their possessions get stuck on the gates of God’s kingdom. But so would everyone else who could not leave things behind.

I do not know why the disciples were so amazed. Two of them left their fishing nets behind, two more of them a fishing boat (not to mention their father). Another one left a lucrative career, pushing his chair away from his tax collector’s desk to follow the strange man with the burning eyes. All of them walked away from something, but not because it was a prerequisite for becoming a disciple. It was more like a consequence, really. He called, they followed, and stuff got left behind. Not because it was bad, but because it was in the way. Not because they had to, but because they wanted to. He called and nothing else seemed all that important anymore.

Jesus was so much more real to them than anything else in their lives that it was no big heroic thing to follow him. He set them free, that is all. It was not their achievement. It was HIS GIFT.

I know, I know. The children, the mortgage, the aging parents, the doctor's bills, the economy, the future. I know. It's the same for me. There are days when threading a camel seems easier than following Jesus.

SOOOOOO, WHO CAN BE SAVED??? And who is brave enough to be free?? The question has not changed much, but neither has the answer: For us it is impossible, but not for God. For GOD all things are possible!!!

Let us pray. Before the questions and the answers in today's Gospel Reading, O Lord, you looked at the man and you loved him. As we wrestle with how we are called to live out your commands, remind us that first, you see us and you love us. Lord, help us to PRAY IT FORWARD in our lives. Your gift of eternal life is just that – a gift! And what a wonderful gift it is. Amen.