

Mark 10:17–31 (NRSV)

As he 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.”

## For He Had Many Possessions

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: October 11, 2015      Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture:      Mark 10:17–31

It looks like a very simple story. A young man comes to Jesus. A good man comes to Jesus. A man who has been a decent person since his youth comes to Jesus. He wants to check in with the Rabbi. “Am I on track? I’ve done the best I can all my life, but I want to be sure I haven’t missed anything.” A young man comes to Jesus and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus lays out the rules. The young man breathes a sigh of relief. They are the rules he’s followed all his days. But then Jesus looks at the young man with no little love and sadness and tells him, “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.” At this the young man walks away shocked and grieving for he has many possessions.

It’s a radical Gospel. The Good News isn’t good news to the young man. It’s bad news to him. If he wants to inherit eternal life, Jesus says he must give away everything else he has, and he has a lot.

It is a straightforward story, and I suspect many of us have felt its pinch, for who among us does not have many things compared to most of the world? The story is straightforward and uncompromisingly demanding. Most of us, like the young man, find it beyond us. If this is the price to inherit eternal life, we walk away from it.

It’s a sobering story for us. Its demands are worth our reflection, worth wrestling with. No question about it.

But here’s a surprise. In the end, though, we may miss Jesus’ most important point if we jump too quickly to the conclusion that the whole problem is our material possessions and the whole solution is to get rid of them. Jesus always invites us to ever deeper levels in the stories we read of him.

In this morning’s passage we get a clue right away that Jesus wants us to see more than meets the eye. A young man comes to Jesus and says, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” The young man addresses Jesus as Good Teacher. He addresses Jesus with high respect. The Biblical scholar Walter Grundmann tells us that in addressing Jesus this way the young man “implies that Jesus is pleasing to God and can show others how to become so.” What could be wrong with that? When Jesus was baptized Mark tells us that a voice came from heaven and said, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” The young man addresses Jesus as Good Teacher, which seems to appropriately and reverently recognize who he is, and also that he can be a good and trustworthy guide. But Jesus responds, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.”

Now, why would Jesus say that? Why would he be so hostile and dismissive to an earnest seeker? It’s a great question. The answer gets to the heart of the story. The young man sees Jesus as good. The young man wants to be good, too. He wants to be good so he can inherit eternal life. And Jesus sends a somewhat subtle signal that is meant to say, if the young man is listening to him; Jesus says basically, “Whoa there, this sure seems to be all about you. You ask me, “What can I do so that I can become good so that I can inherit eternal life? What can I do to get

what I want?” Jesus says, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” Such a response is meant to signal a problem with the young man’s question. He wants to be good for his own benefit.

But Jesus hardly gives the young man time to think about the rebuke. He immediately runs down the list of 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—and the young man leaps for joy. “Fantastic,” he says. “That’s just what I’ve done all my life!” You can just see the young man’s beaming smile and delight. But then Jesus does his best impression of one of those detectives on TV. Just when the young man thinks he’s off the hook, Jesus says, “Oh yeah, I almost forgot. There is one more thing. Give away everything you have.”

More precisely Jesus says, “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.” Again Jesus is more than a little subtle. He tells the young man to sell everything, give the money to the poor and then he will have reward in heaven. Again, it seems pretty straightforward. But notice that Jesus here addresses the question in the young man’s own terms. What reason does Jesus give for the young man to sell his possessions? The answer, so that he may inherit eternal life. Adela Yarbro Collins in her commentary on Mark says “It is noteworthy that the stated motivation for selling his property and giving to the poor is not the neediness of the poor but the [young man’s] accumulation of “treasure in heaven.”<sup>1</sup>

This is the place where everything falls apart for the young man. Let’s summarize. The young man, who is wealthy, wants to enjoy his happy state eternally. He has some suspicion that he’ll have to pay something for the privilege, maybe something more than he’s already done. He asks Jesus about it, and Jesus tells him that basically he needs to follow the moral and religious statutes. That’s the price, and the young man is willing to pay it. Indeed, he has been paying it already. But then Jesus says, “Oh, you also need to give away everything you have.” At that point the young man finds himself on the horns of a dilemma. Now, rather than telling the young man a strategy how to have the good life in this life and in the next, Jesus seems to tell him that he needs to choose. You can have your stuff now or your stuff later, but not both; your choice. You can live the good life for something under a hundred years, or you can live it eternally, but you have to pick one. I think many of us think this way. I think many of us have been taught to think this way.

There’s the story of the Bible thumping preacher who told his congregation that he believed every word in the Bible. He said, “I believe every word in the Bible. If I didn’t, well then; O, if I didn’t believe every word in the Bible, then I’d be out there having fun.” The preacher was willing to pay now and enjoy later. I’m pretty sure the preacher got the Bible wrong, but that’s for another day.

Today, in this story, Jesus really wants us to think in another direction. The young man wants to be good so he can inherit eternal life. He addresses Jesus as good teacher. But Jesus stops him in his tracks and says, “Why do you call me good? Only God is good.” Jesus wants the young man to see that thinking of oneself as good is, well, thinking of oneself. Jesus is trying to get the young man to think, “What does God ask of me?” without asking the question in terms of “What’s in it for me?”

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<sup>1</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins and Harold W. Attridge, *Mark: A Commentary on the Gospel of Mark, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 479.

Jesus then goes on to show the young man just how impossibly painful it is to think the way he does. Ironically, so long as it's all about him, the math won't work. You may enjoy yourself now or later, but not both.

But look how differently the story could have gone with a few changes. There once was a rich young man. He came to Jesus one day, and he noticed that Jesus and his followers were talking about a new way of being; they called it the Kingdom of God. And they were healing the sick and feeding the poor. And the rich young man came to Jesus and said, "Rabbi, teacher, I've spent my life trying to follow the commandments, and I've also been very successful. I've been coming to realize, though, that there's more to life than this. Is there work for me to do in the vineyard?"

I may be wrong about this, but I believe that Jesus' response would have been different in this case. I believe that Jesus would have seen that the young man was beginning to break free from his self-involvement. I believe that Jesus would have invited him to help and gradually, like his other disciples, the young man would have come to worry less about eternal life and more about the discipleship God was calling him to. We deduce from the Gospels that there were many such people, many of them women, who spent a portion of their time and resources in helping out with Jesus' ministry. The disciples themselves see things clearly only after they give up their quest to sit at Jesus' left and right in heaven.

Just to be clear, I am not denying that there is eternal life. I don't know the details any more than any of us does. But I do believe that we do inherit eternal life. But let me tell you a story.

There was once a lonely young man. On the outside everything looked just fine. But inside he was lonely and sad. More than anything he wanted a relationship, someone who would love him. He wanted it so badly that it was all he could think about. But then it came to him one day in prayer that he could and would have this relationship he needed so much. The only thing was that he wouldn't have until he no longer needed it. At first this was very bad news. But sure enough, when his heart began to open beyond what it needed for itself, when it no longer ached in its self-centered loneliness, when his heart no longer needed someone to fill the emptiness inside of him, he began to find relationships like he had always wanted. But now he did not need to clutch it desperately, for it was one part of richly fulfilled life. When it ceased being all about his fulfillment, he found fulfillment.

I believe the inheritance of eternal life is much like that. I believe it was what Jesus meant when he said, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Threaded throughout the Gospels is Jesus' answer. "Love one another as I have loved you." "Feed my sheep." "Take care of the least of these." Amen.