

SECOND READING: Mark 10:17-27

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¹⁷And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁸And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. ¹⁹You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" ²⁰And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth." ²¹And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." ²²Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

²³And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" ²⁴And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how difficult it is^[b] to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." ²⁶And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him,^[c] "Then who can be saved?" ²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God."

Let the words of my mouth be spoken only by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may be led to think upon your truth, for the sake of Christ, our Lord. Amen.

FIRST READING: Revelation 21:1-6a

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Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

"See, the home^[a] of God is among mortals. He will dwell^[b] with them; they will be his peoples,^[c] and God himself will be with them;^[d] ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." ⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." ⁶Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

This is word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

“A Most Important Thing”

When I was a kid, I remember being told often at the dinner table that I needed to finish the meal on my plate and be grateful for what I'd been served. This was especially a big deal it seems when it came to mashed potatoes. I wasn't a big fan. My parents were children of the depression, and both were very conscious of what it was like to go without. We were not rich people, simply middle class by the US economic standards, but my parents would remind us often that there were many children who did not have the benefits we, my sisters and I, had. “Other children do not even have food to eat, or clean water to drink or safe places to sleep at night,” we were told. And so, this story of Jesus from the gospel of Mark, the story so important that it is repeated in the gospel of Matthew and Luke, haunted me. This story of Jesus and the rich, young ruler that I heard in Sunday School haunted me... *“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.’ And when he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”* Was I really supposed to get rid of everything I had? Everything in order to follow Jesus...Really?

Well, it turns out that it was not just me. This story has been “stumping people” and making them uncomfortable for a long time”. In fact, over the centuries there have been a number of different interpretations. The most familiar one, the most appealing interpretation is a more generalized, spiritualized rather than a literal reading of the text. It concludes that Jesus is teaching that we need to unburden ourselves of whatever sins might be keeping us from relying on God, those **spiritual** obstacles, idols, which otherwise would keep us from the kingdom...idols like lust, lying, envy, conceit, selfishness, laziness, impatience, quick judgement, pride, etc. It is a pseudo-historical interpretation because it is thought that the eye of a needle, which Jesus refers to, may have been, may have been, a small door in a larger gate. The door was small enough that camels had to be unpacked of their loads, their burdens, before they could squeeze through.

Now...this interpretation broadens the scope of the story and consequently our minds, and that is good. It is. But the interpretation also inadvertently gives us an excuse to miss the

potential gist of it all, the gist that I may have actually better understood when I was a kid looking at the mashed potatoes on my dinner plate.

John Ortberg, Pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, conducted a great experiment with his congregation, and they were good enough to go along with.¹ I am hoping you to might go along with it too, in the interest of our stewardship discussion today. Rev. Ortberg asked, as I ask you, to reach into your pocket or purse and pull out your checkbook or your wallet, or whatever speaks of your money or your stuff right now. You can hold it for a moment. Feel it. This is what the 21st c tells us we need worship. This is where we're told the god of mammon lives. This should dictate what we feel of ourselves...our identity, our security, our importance, our well-being. That's what everything around us says. We're bombarded with the messages...inundated. And now, I want you to, as an act of trust, hand it to someone next to you....not a spouse...to someone not related to you. Just give it to them. Ok. Now, we're going to take an offering and I want you to give like you've always dreamed of giving. No, just kidding. You can give it back.

This was just an exercise, but it did get your hearts racing a bit, didn't it? With the more spiritualized interpretation of the story there are so many other choices for us to consider as idols that we may not consider the most important one. Wealth might not enter the picture at all. Lamar Williamson says it this way, *"In our efforts to take seriously Jesus' teaching, we spiritualize the message of Mark 10, and in the process we say many things that are true and helpful. Yet the tension of this radical text resists resolution in any way that removes its pressure on all disciples relative to wealth. After we have done our best to make this text say something less upsetting to our system of values, Jesus looks intently at us through it and quietly affirms that life is to be had not by accumulating things, but by disencumbering ourselves."* He goes on, *"If this message does not take our breath away, if we are not shocked, appalled, grieved, or amazed, we have either not yet heard it or heard it so often that we do not*

¹ John Ortberg. "Stewardship" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJQ99YmetM4> (accessed 11-3-18).

really hear it anymore."² Brothers and sisters, I think it boils down to this: **GOD REALLY CARES ABOUT WHAT WE DO WITH OUR WEALTH.**³

In the text, this young man's focus on his wealth and his piety distorted his awareness of God's presence with him and his ultimate purpose.⁴ He needed to quit watching over his p's and q's, and he needed to quit counting all his pennies and instead live, really live. **Wealth for him was not in** rules or things, but **IN** a person, the person of Jesus Christ. It was in the One who'd come to free him from his dependence on his own means. **Wealth for him was not in** "doing" (*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*), but instead in receiving, not trying to earn or buy his salvation, but in simply opening up his hands, once freed of his grip on his money, to accept the gift, the gracious gift...the gift of life abundant, treasure in heaven, life eternally with God in his kingdom. And it was already at hand, assured. In fact, the rich young ruler could have touched it if he'd but reached out. For you see, the Kingdom of heaven is not some place that is far away and yet to come. The kingdom of heaven is where the king is. And Jesus has come to usher in his kingdom. And what's more. He has given us, his followers, dominion (that's kingdom speak). He has made us kingdom-bearers. He gives us the privilege of helping to bring his kingdom, his way, more and more fully to earth. And Oh, how the earth needs this. What do we pray? *"Thy Kingdom Come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."*

It's hard to believe, really, isn't it? We the church, we're the ones to do it. We're the ones, Christ's body. It's us. We are chosen to help magnify the Lord, grow disciples, and meet human need. The Church is who Jesus has entrusted with caring for his children (in ways mentioned today), lifting up the broken hearted, proclaiming good news to the poor, freedom to the captive. It's the church who is to make the world rich, rich in love, mercy, serenity, kindness, justice. Jesus wanted the rich young man to know this. He wanted him to know this most important thing. But the young man couldn't ease his grip in order to receive. Jesus wants us to know this most important thing too. (*pause*)

² Lamar Williams, Jr. Mark. Interpretation. A Bible Commentary. (Louisville: John Knox Press; 1983), 187-88.

³ David Lose. "What Matters Most" <https://vimeo.com/217398757> (accessed 10/30/2018).

⁴Karoline Lewis. "The Thing You Lack." <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3699>. (accessed 10/31/2018).

As we are now in the beginning of what we call our stewardship season, a time to assess what we will pledge to the church for the upcoming year in regard to time, talent and treasure, I thought it might be helpful if I was to offer up a couple of things that have helped Mike and I learn over the years (many years) to ease our grasp on the almighty dollar. So, for what they're worth, here they are...

1. Remind yourselves always that the time, talent and treasure belongs to God anyway, and give off the top (As this regards money, make your check out at the beginning of the month so that you're not giving from what is left over at the end of the month, after you've paid all your other bills, especially after you've spent what you're going to spend on yourself). If someone needs go without, it need not be God. God needs the honor of getting the first fruits.

2. Set your mind on tithing if you're not already doing so and go up from there. The Bible offers a tithe 10% as a guide, keeping 90% for oneself. Pretty good deal really. Develop a road map regarding how you will meet your goals. If you're not used to this, just begin where you are, and increase by 1% every time you get a raise. In a few years, you'll be giving 10% and then it will fit well into your budget. Move from 10% of your net to 10% of your gross. Then add your dividend and interest into the figure. When you are given gifts, tithe 10% of them. You will not miss it and God will notice. You will be rewarded.

3. Always be ready to reassess and expect to struggle some. If you are like Mike and I, you may not always achieve your goals. You might have to back up. God understands. But then again, you might be able to do some sacrificing too. You'll be surprised at how the scriptural witness is true, you'll be blessed over and over again for your sacrifice.

The best piece of advice I think however I can offer, however is to simply open your heart. It might not have been at the dinner table, but I recall my little sister asking my dad once if our family was rich. Of course, we weren't. But Dad said something remarkable. I've not forgotten. He said something to the effect of, "Well, we're the richest people I know. We have love, and health and happiness and we have Jesus, and that's the most important thing." *And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."* (Mk 10: 21) Amen.