

lec 28 B-Oct. 13, 2024

Psalm 90:12-27; Amos 5:6-7, 10-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

St Paul Newark-Barbara Melosh

The questions of the New Testament send shock waves down the centuries. They continue to challenge and offend, to lay bare our souls and pierce our hearts. They draw us into the force field of the kingdom of God. We hear one of them today in the mouth of a rich man who comes to Jesus, asking, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

This is a story about an earnest seeker—about a man who is eager to live an ethical life and do what is pleasing to God. And yet...this same man is the only person in the New Testament who has a direct encounter with Jesus and goes away grieving.

Jesus’ advice to get rid of his stuff shocks him, and he can’t or won’t do what he needs to do to receive Jesus’ offer of life. This story shocks us, too, because it says our possessions can separate us from one another and from God. It’s a story about the outrageous claims of the gospel—a God who asks the impossible. And it’s a story about the God for whom all things are possible.

We know almost nothing about this man who comes to Jesus, who is first identified in Mark only as a “man”. He comes eagerly to Jesus—runs to him, and kneels in front of him, addresses him with respect. “Good Teacher”. He asks, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

And then he finds himself in one of those puzzling exchanges, where Jesus does what he so often does, answering the man’s question with another question—but really, it’s not a question at all but more of a challenge or a rebuke, even. “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” Then, Jesus reminds him of the commandments—probably something of an insult to this ethical Jew, who surely knew the Ten Commandments along with the other six hundred-some Jewish laws. But still, the man replies respectfully, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.”

Mark tells us, “Jesus, looking at him, loved him.”

But then, Jesus goes on, “You lack one thing.”

Like so many of Jesus' answers, it's not quite an answer. The man has asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" It's an ambitious question, from a man who is probably used to taking charge and getting what he wants. But now, Jesus is telling him he hasn't got what he needs. That must have been a shock, to this man who lacked for nothing—he had possessions, money, and honor. That word for "lack" is heavy with meaning in the original language of the New Testament. It's used for someone who is left behind—someone who is inferior—someone who has fallen short, or failed. A loser.

Still, the man has come to Jesus asking for something. Maybe he himself feels some lack in his life, even though he's a man who seems to have everything. He's kept all the commandments, but still it seems he isn't sure that's enough. So he asks what he needs to do to have the life God has promised.

But then Jesus tells him that what he needs to do is let go of all that he has. "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

Okay, so this is totally outrageous, right? Rich, poor, or somewhere in between, getting rid of all that you've got, and giving away the money? Puzzling over this extreme demand—squirming under it—people come up with lots of ways to wiggle out from under it.

Here are some of them.

Maybe Jesus is exaggerating, and as he has often done in the parables he told.

Or another: If we give away everything, we'll be dependent ourselves. If we hold on to some of it, we can use it to help others. Effective altruists have taken that line of thinking to the limit. They aim to make as much money as possible so they can do more with their giving.

Or another: A few years ago I remember hearing this story and being very troubled by it, so much so that I talked to my pastor about it. His answer was, "Well, THAT man was called to give up his stuff. We're not all called to

do the same.” Whew! What a relief. But still, it left me uneasy. Was I really off the hook?

Or, there was the answer I heard from a man in another congregation—a rich man. He was sure that God had given him all that money because he was somebody who deserved it. Who could handle it and use it well. He didn’t worry for a minute that money might be getting between him and God.

And maybe it wasn’t, but Jesus doesn’t let us get too sure of that.

He tells the disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of heaven!” This doesn’t make sense to them, because in their world it was widely assumed that wealth was the mark of God’s favor. A rich person had responsibilities, no question about that—the proper use of wealth and the care of the poor are among the most common subjects in the Bible. And some of the prophets, like Amos in our first reading, warned about the judgment that awaited those who trampled on the poor. But wealth in itself was not seen as an obstacle to faithful living. Here, Jesus presents it as a grave danger—a matter of life and death. “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.” The disciples are astounded, and they ask one another, “Then who can be saved?” that is, if a rich man—one marked by God’s favor--can’t get into the kingdom of God, who can?

Jesus tells them, “For mortals it is impossible”—and notice, he’s not just talking about rich people here.

It seems Peter noticed this too, and got worried about where he and the rest of the disciples stood. So he reminded Jesus, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.”

Jesus gives him a baffling answer. It sounds good at first—he tells Peter, “anyone who’s given up what you have will have huge rewards in this life,” but then adds, “with persecutions.” And he ends by saying, “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first”—another saying that leaves the listeners wondering uneasily where they stand.

So where does this story leave us, as we ponder the rich man’s question?

What must I do to inherit eternal life? What must I do to inherit eternal life?

The answer is “nothing.” It’s already yours—yours, by grace and by gift. All that we have, all that we are—all is gift.

So open your hands, and let go of whatever you are clinging to. Open your hands, and give in grateful response to what God has done.