

Sermon for October 10, 2021

Mark 10:17-31

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My name is Pastor Jill Henning and I serve as the Assistant to the Bishop for the Southeastern Synod of the ELCA and I bring you greetings from Bishop Kevin Strickland and your siblings in Christ, in Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee and Mississippi and from Lutherans from across Region 9 of the ELCA.

Last week, we heard how Jesus reframed a question about divorce and in his answer to the Pharisees' test, Jesus also addressed the status of women and children. Unless you receive the kingdom of God as a child, you can't enter it, he tells us. And then he shows us how to receive children by opening his arms to them.

In today's passage, Jesus is still on the road. He's about a quarter of the way through his journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, and the teaching is getting more intense.

The young man runs up and kneels before Jesus. He calls Jesus "Good Teacher." We have to think that he is absolutely sincere in his submission to Jesus' authority. "What must I do to inherit eternal life" he asks Jesus. Often we hear this passage and we think to ourselves that this guy just doesn't get it. He wants to know what he can do. He thinks eternal life as an exchange of goods – something he can get if he follows all the rules, all the right steps.

I don't know about you, but I often read a text or passage of scripture and I try and envision the scene, what did it look like, what was everyone doing. Every time I read this passage I can't help but think of Jesus like a parent or a teacher of a young child who wants to know what they need to do to get a treat. As a parent, that at one point had a young child that would come and say, "Mom, I picked up my toys, can I have a treat now?" I feel like Jesus must have that slight grin that parents get as they listen to their children going through the list of what they have done, "I picked up, I shared my toys, I was nice to my sibling, I promise never to do that again, really Mom I do!" As a parent you look at them, knowing that the toys really aren't put away, but probably shoved in the corner, that they probably didn't share their toys, weren't really nice and will definitely going to not get it right. You know the look, if you've been a parent or a teacher or a coach. I've always imagined Jesus standing there with that look – part sly smile, while trying to be serious look.

So "What must I do to inherit eternal life" the young man asks and Jesus reframes the question, just as Jesus did with the question about divorce, and so he starts listing off 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 this young man, eager to prove his worth says "Yup I've kept all of those" and then Jesus tells him to do the one thing that he knows this young man will struggle to do – sell everything and give the money away and come and follow Jesus. It's a hard ask.

Jesus then turns to his disciples and again says the hard thing – the impossible thing, he tells them that 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 young man that came kneeling at Jesus' feet claimed to have been obedient to the Law his entire life. And yet, obedience isn't enough. The disciples question Jesus when he says that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. "Then who can be saved?"

We're not surprised that Peter, even after watching this interaction with the young man and hearing Jesus' proclamation, that he and the other disciples have done just what Jesus asked the young man to do – they gave it all up to follow Jesus and even that Jesus says – comes with a cost.

Our young man struggles because he wants to know what he must do. The disciples struggle because it's clear that Jesus makes it sound like an impossible act for someone to get into the kingdom of God and yet Jesus says God makes the impossible possible.

The writer of Mark's Gospel makes it clear that Jesus doesn't look with condemnation at this young man but rather looks at him, loved him.

How many of you remember the movie "City Slickers" with Billy Crystal. It's a movie that tells the story of an unhappy group of friends that go on a two-week cattle drive vacation where mayhem and chaos ensue. The part that always sticks with me and reminds me of this scripture is the character, Curly, played by the actor Jack Palance – tells Billy Crystal's character, Mitch that the secret to life is "one thing", he goes on to tell Mitch that if you stick to that, than everything else don't mean, well he used a word I won't repeat but everything else doesn't mean anything and Mitch asks him what that one thing is and Curly says that that is what Mitch needs to figure out. The rest of the movie really is about Mitch figuring that out.

I don't know if the writer of City Slickers had read this passage from Mark but I have often felt that City Slickers was a modern parable of this text. Jesus is pretty clear that we can't do anything to earn our way into the kingdom of God but God can do what is impossible to us.

You know sometimes the good news – the Gospel is difficult to hear. It was for the young man and at times it is for us. We, also at times, have stood asking this same question "What must I do?" and we list off the good we have done – we've fed the poor, we've gone to church, we've been loving to our neighbors, we've done and we've done and we think, we've done all this so God will bless us and then life happens and it's hard. Being a disciple, being a follower of Jesus doesn't mean that it's going to be easy. We can follow Jesus, hear the good news of Christ and still face struggles. We can follow Jesus and still face pain and disappointments. We can follow Jesus and know the love of God and mess up.

Siblings in Christ – and you need to know that I am saying this as much for myself, as I am for you – nowhere did Jesus say following him was going to make everything perfect and great – but there is hope because even in our brokenness, even in our pain, even in our humanness God comes – for God all things are possible and because God makes it possible for us to be a part of God’s creation, God’s kingdom, God’s love, God’s presence than knowing that one thing means we can face whatever struggles, whatever pain, whatever loss, whatever life has to offer because we are God’s. We are God’s beloved. We are loved.

I’m not sure if that is what the writers of City Slickers had in mind with that scene but it is what I think is the hope found in the Gospel that calls us out into the kingdom of God that God ushers in, in and through us. For God all things are possible – even to use us. Amen