

Sermon

Overcoming the Spiritual Power of Money

Pastor Lisa Giacomazza

Bacon Memorial Presbyterian Church

October 10, 2021

Mark's gospel today we find Jesus speaking to a man who we don't know a lot about but he does appear in all four gospels. Mark only describes him as a wealthy man and from the way Jesus is speaking to the man and the way the man describes himself, he has led a good and ethical life, staying true to the laws of Moses. And he poses the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Goes right to the question I think we would all like to ask Jesus given the chance. Have you ever asked a question and been absolutely blown away by the answer – especially a question where you kind of think you know the answer but you ask so you can hear someone else say it – maybe a self-affirming kind of question. Well, I don't think this man was looking for that quite but he was definitely blown away by the answer. "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."

I think his confusion comes from the fact that then and now we look at people of means and even ourselves and feel that when we are quote en quote "blessed" with these things. Blessed with a good life, with financial security or even prosperity. What a blessing to have a nice home, car, boat, trips, stuff. And we look at that as God's doing. God gave us these things maybe as a reward for being and doing good. I definitely this man did. But goes Jesus goes right to that – to his wealth. Now Jesus doesn't say take it out in the yard and burn it or bury it, you don't need it. He says give it away ...he says give it away to the poor.

You know, Buddhists feel possession lead to suffering. This is why Buddhist monks live in monestaries and have little of their own, as little as possible. Catholic priests and nuns take an oath of poverty – they can't accept gifts and live lavishly. For the Catholic, it is a sacrifice. For the Buddhist, it is a gift.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus is being very direct in these chapters as in last week when he addressed marriage and divorce...and now possessions and wealth. And you know, with today's scripture, it's easy to read this and think, good – this is about them. I'm not rich. I don't have lots of possessions – boats, multiple houses, cars, whatever – collections...but let's hold on for a second.

- Over 1 billion people live on \$2.50 per day or less, including 280 million people in extreme poverty who live on less than \$1.25 per day.
- More than 75 percent of the world's poor populations live in rural areas and depend on agriculture for their livelihood.
- In developing countries, the poor spend 60-80 percent of their income on food. Americans spend less than 10 percent.
- Over 800 million people worldwide do not have enough food to eat and more than 3 million children die from malnutrition each year.
- Nearly 1 billion people live without electricity.
- 40 million children worldwide live without adequate shelter.
- More than 750 million people lack adequate access to clean water.
- 270 million children have no access to health services.
- Nearly a billion people entered the 21st century unable to read or write.
- 1.7 billion people do not have a bank account or access to basic financial services.

So looking at this information, I don't think most of us can read this scripture and think it's about "them". Now, Jesus isn't saying – you don't give enough. But he is saying a lot in this passage. Jesus, just like the commandments that were brought forth by God, were given not to control or punish us, but to help us live freely, and enable us to be who we are intended to be by God. Jesus is different in the sense that he is flesh and blood and is living an human existence when he shares these things. For all intents and purposes, this kind of makes him the absolute authority to answer that question. How do I inherit the Kingdom of God?

Psalms 22 reads like a verbal tennis match between the conflicting emotions of an anguished believer..."God where are you?" "You are the best!", "Why don't you answer me?" "You've been faithful to me since the day I was born!" "How could you let this happen to me?" "I am so grateful for your steadfast love." The writer's back and forth proclamations of devotion and despair swing from one end of the arc of the pendulum of faith to the other and his agony is visible for all the world to see. Yet while the psalmist feels abandoned by God, there is never a wavering that God is there – still saying My God – not just O God as in some omnipotent far-away figure, but personal – My God. This lament of suffering and yet still feeling God will hear, where does that faith come from? When we are suffering? So much of our suffering is of our own doing. Not all – but today let's talk about that which we can change. Because despite making bad choices, going down wrong roads, saying the wrong things, faith is greater than that which seeks to destroy it. Despite this writer's suffering, faith is winning.

There is great risk in personal suffering, which has the potential to cause the sufferer to withdraw into self-pity and feelings of persecution. "Why me?" we

ask. We pull away from God and from other people, tangled in a net of fear and anger at what we receive as an unjust sentence that we do not deserve. The world becomes an evil place and our sense of alienation hastens our personal destruction. Yet suffering can have the opposite effect. It can draw us closer to God, increase our faith. Romans 5 says “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

The statistics I read you early about the poverty of the world – this does not equal the faith those suffering in that condition have in God. Many have a strong conviction in God, a strong relationship with Christ and are strengthened in their suffering. Our affirmation of faith in the midst of pain and sorrow points to the truth of a God who holds the whole world in a divine and tender grasp, the world not just of our history, but of all eternity.

Jesus came to live among us as a human man. And as he did he became aware of the things that cause unnecessary suffering. In this passage, God is showing us that when we hold onto more than we need, when we have many possessions when children are starving, it causes suffering. There is a documentary I encourage you all to watch called “Happy” and Director Roko Belic spent 10 years interviewing people from all over the world in all different circumstances and all people answered one question the same – when asked what they want out of life, they want to “be happy”. And many are – but not the ones he thought. The ones who smiled the most and were the most jovial were the ones with the least – some of the poorest. And he surmised that those with a great deal spent most of their lives working and worrying about losing their status

and their possessions. So I wonder – for myself, yes I do. I worry about bills all the time – the cost of things worry me a lot. So in this question posed by “the man” in our gospel from Mark – perhaps Jesus was trying to offer him a ticket to freedom – give all that junk up , give to those who are deprived because you kept too much – and then, follow me.

Sounds simple – but even the disciples didn’t really get it. Jesus sensed this and gave them even stronger words – “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.” And in their frustration they say, “Then who can be saved?” For us, impossible – change is so difficult. For us personally, for our culture – our culture says buy more – get more – bigger – lots...make more money – that is success. Jesus – ooo, no it’s not. It is impossible for us to follow all of these laws – alone. But it is not impossible for God. God can transform our hearts – he can transform an entire people- with this statement to the disciples, Jesus holds out hope for them and for us – the hope that with God, change and first steps are not only possible but are already happening.

So what then are we to do about our money? Jesus does not leave us with any easy response. We are left at the mercy of God, but Jesus’ summons requires total transformation and commitment. For the rich man, Jesus’ call meant giving up all that he had for a life of discipleship. Can it mean less for us? Our response will show whether we truly believe that we will be rewarded in this life and the next.