

**Sunday, October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

**Pentecost 19**

**Mark 10:17-31**

<sup>17</sup>As [Jesus] 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?” <sup>18</sup>Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. <sup>19</sup>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.’” <sup>20</sup>He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” <sup>21</sup>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.” <sup>22</sup>When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

<sup>23</sup>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!” <sup>24</sup>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! <sup>25</sup>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.” <sup>26</sup>They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” <sup>27</sup>Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

<sup>28</sup>Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” <sup>29</sup>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, <sup>30</sup>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. <sup>31</sup>But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

We all know stories like this...a man with lots of money in his wallet pushes his way to the head of a long line at the concert, or the Las Vegas show, flashing a wad of \$100 bills for the bouncer to see. And looking up at him, says something like, “What’ll it take to get me and my group in, pal?”, obviously hoping the money will convince the bouncer to pull back the gate, and escort them to the best seats in the house.

Or the wealthy family that charters a private jet cross country to beat the line to get their Covid shots...going ahead of others who’ve been waiting patiently to get theirs, having played by the rules and registered online.

Or most recently, we’ve seen wealthy families promising large donations in the hundreds of thousands of dollars to their favorite Ivy League or other schools in order to get their sons or daughters admitted to these prestigious institutions, even though the kids’ grades didn’t make them eligible, or the sport they said their kid played in high school, the kid had never played at all.

We've all seen it all too often, people using their wealth, their privilege, their influence, in order to gain favor, to gain an advantage, to get in first at the concert or the show, to get ahead in whatever context it may be. And in our privilege, we've figured out how to leverage it to our benefit. And we're not used to hearing "no", because in the past, these things have worked for us, getting us into the concerts, the best schools, the front of the line, while others less well-resourced, wait their turn like everyone else.

And when we hear "no", or "you can't get in", or "you can't cut in line", or "you can't buy way in here", we're shocked. Insulted. We just can't believe that we can't work the system to get what we want, because it's always worked for us in the past. Our wealth and relative our privilege has allowed us to pretty much get what we want, even if it's at expense someone else.

I imagine that this is the case of the man gospel today, to a greater or lesser extent, although we can't be sure. Even though in the text Mark doesn't specifically state that the man is wealthy, he does say that he "had many possessions." He's been successful in his life...he's accumulated degree...wealth...stuff...things mark a successful life. And more, he's been a good Jew, true to his heritage. He knew the Law Moses, did all the right things by the Law, and so forth.

And more, he'd been able to use his wits, his privilege, his wealth to get what he wanted in life, until now. And herein this brief encounter with Jesus, he asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life...eternal life! He had been contemplating it for a while, no doubt. Keep in mind that eternal life isn't something most Jews gave much thought to. You're born, you live, and you die and are put in a pine box and lowered into the earth.

In other words, the man may be saying something like someone in the examples above might have said to the bouncer at the gate to the concert, "What'll it take for me to gain eternal life, because whatever it takes...I can make it happen. Just tell me. Donations to my local temple? Do volunteer work in my community? Take course in earning one's salvation? Learn a new language? I'm in. Whatever it takes...I can make it happen." And Jesus gives him an answer that in his entire life probably, he's never had anyone tell him. Jesus tells him to do the impossible for him, which is to sell all he has give the proceeds to poor. Scratching needle noise across the record.

Knowing that his answer would not give the man comfort, or a way forward, Jesus knew that doing what he had required of him was going to be impossible. Thus the eye opening image of a camel trying to get through the eye of a needle. No way! Impossible. Jesus is essentially saying to man, "there's nothing you can do. Nothing. All your money...privilege...all the gimmicks that in the past have worked for you, when it comes to this request, they won't work here."

Jesus knew that this man, despite being good Jew, despite all his success, all the wealth

he'd amassed over his life, weren't going to do him any good when it came to securing his own salvation. No amount of money, or coercion, or bribing will work for him in his quest for this elusive goal of eternal life. None.

Jesus is essentially requiring the man to give up everything he had, all that he had earned in his life, and be like a little child, who has nothing, and THEN...then, Jesus says, you shall gain eternal life. An impossible goal for this man, and for us.

The writer Hebrews gets it right, I think, in our readings today, when he says, that, ah, "indeed the word of God is living, active, sharper than any two edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints marrow. Words. Words that tell us we can't have what we want. And it hurts.

For this man, giving up all he owned and giving the proceeds to the poor, was impossible for him, and so he went away, leaving Jesus, grieving. I'm sure other translations describe his reaction stronger than grieving.

But there are two words in this reading today that I think are key to our understanding of what Mark trying to say here, with his reference to Jesus' image of the camel and the eye of a needle. First, a simple word with two letters...do. What must I do? What must I do to inherit eternal life, the man asks Jesus, as if there were some prescribed formula, or playbook that exists to simply follow along for the prize of life eternal.

And the second word is inherit. Think about that word, inherit, and what it means. When I inherit something, it's given to me as a free gift. It's something that's passed on, or handed down, usually by a relative, or someone who has loved you, or who does love you. This something is not earned, it usually comes without conditions placed upon it. It's given freely to us out of the love of the giver. These same things apply to us today... as believers.

And, there is nothing we can *do* to inherit eternal life. We can't earn it. We can't buy it. We can't donate to our favorite charities...although you can still give generously to your church! We can't make ourselves poor enough to gain a place in heaven. Eternal life is a gift. A free gift. It's something we inherit from a loving God who gave his son to suffer and die in our place.

There's no price that we can pay to earn what has been given to us...no bargaining...no working out a deal with God...no tipping St Peter at the pearly gates. It is given to us, freely...at a great cost, and that sacrifice is the suffering death burial of Jesus himself.

So folks, the pressure's off. Take a big sigh of relief. Raise your hands up to God and say hank you Jesus for delivering me from the pit! Because in Jesus crucified and risen...our debt has

been paid, our burden has been lifted, and life beyond the grave, the one thing the man in our story today couldn't buy, has been freely granted to you and me. That's the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, yesterday...today...and for always.

So, sisters and brothers in the faith, take it, take it freely. And live into it. Pass it on to someone else who needs to hear some good news about Jesus. Help relieve them of their burden and doubt, like the man in our gospel today, because with God nothing is impossible.

Amen.