

God and Possibility Mark 10

God loves you, Jesus, and so do I! Way to go, Jesus! Tell it like it is!

I am sincere in hoping this is your response to this text. If it is not, I understand and will do my best to invite you to the gospel word so that you may hear it and receive it.

A man approaches, interrupting Jesus who was turning toward Jerusalem on a journey of self-emptying and obedience. The man asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

He is not a newcomer to God. He knows the commandments and faithfully obeys them. He knows that eternal life is a gift of God. I think he is wishing to honor God by living to the best of his ability in a manner that pleases God. That is what faith produces in us, a desire to honor God.

Jesus honors the question and engages the man. The one thing lacking, however, proves to be a decisive factor. Jesus asks the man to do what he asks of all who wish to honor God. Give over control of all that you think you cannot live without in this world. Then Jesus addresses him in particular, "Then come, and follow me."

People have struggled with this proclamation since Jesus first said it. But did you know that others for years have tried to water down this difficult word of Jesus? It seems that our universal human response to this word is not to believe that Jesus was talking about our wealth and our possessions. Do you want to hear how people of faith have tried to avoid this word?

7. Scribes noticed the word for camel might, in some rare circumstances, be translated as rope. So passing through the eye of a needle as thread is certainly easier than as a beast of burden.
6. Others rumored that a 'Needle Eye' was a gate in Jerusalem. Further investigation proved this only to be a rumor.
5. Some tried to point to a historical time when a few were required to give up all their wealth but not everybody. That is more likely fiction and not historical.
4. Some liked to think that this text was Jesus only saying this to address the man's weak spot. Then for the rest of us, it would not necessarily be about our possessions, but about our weak spots, like eating fried cheese curds, or collecting Minneapolis Moline tractors, or not being able to pass up another pair of shoes.
3. Some taught this was about two levels of discipleship, one for the ordinary person, so not about our wealth or possessions really, and then one for those who want to practice being perfect, like those who take a vow of poverty in a monastery.
2. Jesus was only testing the man, intensifying the demand to get the man to see that he cannot obtain salvation by working for it or earning it in any way, but that Jesus did not really want him to give up his possessions. But a close look at the text does not support this reading.
1. The number one way to soften this text.....this was literally not a problem of money, but the love of money. This, too, weakens the stark demand of Jesus.

Jesus said none of these things. Instead, Jesus looked on the man with compassion and acceptance and reaching for him said very clearly, “You lack one thing, go, sell what your own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” Jesus asks him to divest himself, to become poor AND to redistribute whatever he had among the poor with their many and various needs. Jesus is asking him to change the way he relates to the poor. Jesus also called the man to adhere to a new master, to Jesus himself, the one who is on a journey of self-emptying and obedience.

At this point we hear that the man was a person with great wealth and possessions. He was probably used to solving any problems he encountered by the use of his wealth. He was overcome with shock and grief and he walked away from Jesus. The truth can hit us hard. The truth of the kingdom cuts us straight to the heart. The situation of the man was laid bare. It was suddenly clear to the man that Jesus now knew him through and through. The word of Jesus cut to the heart and he responded, just not yet as far as Jesus was leading him. The man did not think he had it in himself to make a radical change in his view of the world and how he could navigate in it.

We do not think we have it in us to respond to these great calls of Jesus, to divest ourselves of all that we treasure on earth, and to cling to Jesus for all of our life’s needs. We mostly do not think it is possible. We wish to hold on to our own solutions, and make our own decisions. Little do we know how the world is trying to get us to pay attention to our own needs rather than where God might lead us.

The coercion of advertising has always been present in my lifetime. It is insidious, taking a little bit of us here and there. Our attention during the Super Bowl has shifted from the game to rating the commercials. Black Friday is no longer a 24 hour day. We have an eye for novelty and are encouraged to have the latest. The result is that we never use up what we buy. The solution of the day is to give to thrift stores but they are drowning in our offerings of things we never really needed. We know how difficult it is to make a change in how we view the world and how we might navigate through it.

A couple of weeks ago I tuned into a lecture on stewardship issues. It went like this: we can no longer use the word “tithe” frankly because hardly anyone is doing it. Oh, but, by the way, if you are tithing, thank you so much. It is an Old Testament principle that is simply out of step. It is law driven. What we need to do is inspire people with the story of God’s love.

Back to our story, Jesus looked on the man with compassion and acceptance reaching for him he said, “Go, sell, give to the poor, come and follow me.” He was asking the man to live in a new radical way that would shift his trust from himself to Jesus. This slide helps me in thinking about this story.

Tip = It’s all mine. I give God a little, now and then.

Tithe = It’s mostly mine. I give God His 10%.

Steward = It’s all God’s. I give as much as I can.

Sacrifice = It’s all God’s. I give it all to him and live on as little as possible.

I was given a gift although I was not aware of it when it happened over 35 years ago. My home pastor was engaging me in conversations of life and faith as he was calling me into public ministry. One of those conversations was about giving offerings. The base point from my rather independent home congregation went like this, everybody gave just enough to meet the budget

and no one gave too much more because the annual giving was publically published. It was expected that the known millionaire gave more and that those who were cash poor gave less, but always just enough. It was a system of restrained giving with little talk of faithful response to the God of abundance or of a mission which might drive the ministry. So my pastor challenged me to give more than most.

My pastor said to me, "You know, it is possible to tithe and have enough to live on." So I did and I have for my adult life. I have always thought he got me at the right time, when I was young, before I had established other ways to use the tool of money. I am deeply grateful for all that I have learned about giving by engaging a practice. But I still stand with everyone else, hearing Jesus call today to divest myself of those things of the world which I don't think I can live without, grow in my compassion for the poor and follow him.

The story of the rich young man who walks away in grief is a story for all of us. We all have our stories of what it means to follow as God is leading us and directing us and showing us what is possible. It is good to remember that we are all in this together because we are recipients of God's grace in Jesus Christ. We have been claimed in the waters of baptism and become a fountain of life for all. We are all in this together since we all sin and fall short of the glory of God. We are all in this together when Christ takes on our sin and gives us his righteousness freeing us to reach out and spend ourselves for the sake of neighbor.

Today we are especially all in this together as congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in Eau Claire, Wisconsin as we go out in a collaborative effort, giving of ourselves through care for our neighbors. We need to engage in these very real activities as an expression of faith, of a desire to honor God for what God has first given us.

The rich, young man walked away before Jesus spoke his healing word. "For God all things are possible." I have wondered what happened to that man. For sure he was cut to the heart when challenged to empty himself of his wealth and reach out to the neighbors of his day who were in need and then follow the traveling preacher. I wonder if he ever heard the word of hope, "for God all things are possible." I wonder if he ever knew of Jesus suffering and death, of God raising him from the dead, of God affirming all that Jesus did and said. Because I believe he was one moment away from a radical turn that would alter his worship, his prayer, his attention to the word, his service, his giving, frankly all that he was.

Those who believe they believe in God, but without passion in the heart, without anguish of mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, and even at times without despair, believe only in the idea of God, and not in God himself. - **Madeleine L'Engle**

The young man had the challenge, he had the grief, and all else that was needed was the unmistakable word of healing and reconciliation. In the hope that someone today will hear, God knows the human heart, yours and mine. Jesus looks on us with compassion and acceptance. His word reaches through time, "I know, it seems untenable, yet, it is true. For God all things are possible."