

“Possession”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Mark 10:17-31

March 1, 2020 - First Sunday in Lent

From time to time a passage of scripture shows up in worship and we make a joke about how we're glad *that one* doesn't appear very often. It's usually got something to do with weeping and gnashing of teeth or God smiting some wayward civilization. This reading from Mark is a little different in that we understand it to be true, and it doesn't sound peculiar at all connected to the Jesus we know and love. It's not gruesome or reflective of an ancient understanding of science or anything like that.

It's just convicting and makes us gulp audibly and check for the emergency exits. It chases us through the centuries. We don't know how to swat it away, so we try to soften it. (More on that in just a moment.) But here it remains, greeting us as we take our first steps on the Lenten path.

I invite you to listen for good news in this reading from the Gospel according to Mark:

As he 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?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 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.’” He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” 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.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

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

Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” 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, 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. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

It was probably the day after Mark wrote down these words that somebody who had a few possessions tried to find a way around them. Maybe you've heard about a gate into Jerusalem that was referred to as the “Eye of the Needle” which required a camel entering through it to have all its packs removed and for

the camel to bow down. That's a neat story, except there's zero archaeological evidence that it's true. That fact hasn't stopped it from being shared in sermons since about the 9th Century.

I've also heard it said that this is a mistranslation and that Jesus isn't talking about a camel at all, but about a rope or a cable. Those are still hard to pass through the eye of a needle, but not quite as tall an order as an entire camel. Other ancient texts use a similar phrase about a camel and a needle — or an elephant and a needle! But whether we're trying to make the needle bigger or the camel smaller, we're likely missing the point. And I think we know that.

For the disciples, it's a *surprise* to hear that the wealthy have a spiritual stumbling block. They're "perplexed." If a person's impressive wealth isn't a guaranteed sign that they're favored by God, well, what's to become of a bunch of disciples with dirty feet, roaming from town to town, dependent on generosity for food and shelter?

But we are not fishermen stuck in the tenth chapter of Mark — we have the benefit of knowing more of the story.

We know this Jesus and *of course* he's worried about the wealthy.

We know he turns things upside-down and a crown into a cross and finds victory through vulnerability.

We can take a long read of scripture and discover that Biblical references to wealth, poverty, and justice outnumber references to hell by a ratio of 14:1.

And so we hear this story and, despite what the bestselling versions of Christianity out there try to tell us and sell us — you know you can't take scripture literally *all the time*, right? — we know deep down that hoarding wealth is antithetical to the Gospel. We just need to figure out what that means for us.

When the man first shows up, we don't know anything about him other than that he kneels before Jesus and he leads with a compliment, "Good Teacher." I'm sure he's kneeling out of a sense of deference, but we've seen people kneel before Jesus before. They're usually asking for healing when they do that.

Jesus deflects the compliment and starts listing the part of the Ten Commandments that has to do with community. Except he adds one that we don't hear from Moses — "You shall not defraud" — almost as if he's trying to see if the man, or anyone else, is reading the user agreement. The man is confident that he's been a pretty righteous dude, and so Jesus tells him the one thing he lacks:

Sell your stuff. Give the proceeds to the needy. Follow me.

The man is shocked. And then, we are told, he goes away "grieving, for he had many possessions."

It seems that he has made his choice, and that it hurts. He chooses his stuff. We grieve when we have lost something. He knows that he is giving up something much bigger. But he can't help himself. And so he grieves.

We have been reading through Mark since Christmas and we have seen so many people meet Jesus and

leave the encounter in amazement, telling people what wonderful blessing they have experienced, even as Jesus has told them to not tell. But not this man.

Of course, those other people were all healed, or had their loved ones healed. They were cured of illness or had their sight restored or were freed from a demon that was possessing them. But not this man.

He remained gripped by possession.

He couldn't let go. He couldn't trust. He couldn't say to himself, "The Good Teacher is calling...and I will follow."

And now we have a choice to make. We could widen that needle or shrink that camel.

We could take an inventory of our stuff and come to the conclusion that we don't have many possessions.

We could decide that wealth was this particular man's burden, and that Jesus would say a different thing to us.

We could read plainly what Jesus said, and though we don't feel wealthy, we could remind ourselves that the vast majority of humanity is looking up at each and every one of us.

We could pledge, right this second, that every single one of us will sell everything we own, including this building, and give it all to the poor tomorrow morning. If we did that, I'm fairly certain we'd end up on the news.

Before making a decision, y'all, there's something else we must do. We have to listen again to one more piece of this text. Before giving the man his prescription, Mark tells us "Jesus, looking at him, loved him."

How many times do you reckon the verb "to love" appears in the gospel of Mark?

Four times. It appears three times in a three verse span in chapter 12.

There, Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy and Leviticus, when he's asked which is the greatest commandment. He says, "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." And then one of the scribes quotes part of that line back to him.

Aside from him quoting scripture in response to that question, the only other time we hear about "love" is right here.

Jesus, looking at him, loved him.

And so, while we can't quite get off the hook — I do think Jesus very clearly wants us to choose the "give it all up to the poor for him" option — I do also know that Christ loves us, even when we are gripped by our possessions.

Here we are, with this call to the most radical discipleship, knowing that we won't do what Peter and company did. It's...impossible. Right? Jesus seems to know that we'll see it that way. And he loves us. That leaves the real choice for us: to live our lives ignoring this call or to live our lives wrestling with it, knowing that we rely on God for the impossible.

Mark does this, and will continue to do it, to us: to leave us with an unresolved discomfort seemingly designed to push us further down the path, chasing after Jesus with our questions and our dissatisfaction and our yearning to understand.

This is part of the deal for those who try to follow. We know what we ought to do. We know it's impossible. We know we're loved. We know the world doesn't look right.

We see a disparity in wealth in this country that is scandalous.
Do you know how much a billion dollars is?

If we ignore taxes and you were able to be paid \$114 an hour (a number chosen completely at random and certainly not to make the math work in an interesting way!), and you started working for that princely sum at midnight early on March 1, 1020 — we're talking High Middle Ages, a few hundred years before the printing press — and you worked twenty-four hours a day and took no unpaid breaks and worked the weekends and saved every cent under your mattress, then you would have accumulated one billion dollars just after Saturday Night Live ended last night.

This path to the cross with Jesus will show us things far harder to comprehend than one billion dollars,
like a God who asks for everything we have,
like a God who loves us anyway,
like a savior whose to-do list includes death and resurrection.

What if each step,
each decision,
each holy struggle,
each financial transaction,
each choice we make about what we spend investing in inequality
and what we spend investing in justice,
left us either grieving or healed,
wailing or rejoicing,
possessed or freed?