

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

October 14, 2018

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Mark. (Mark 10: 17-31)

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?” 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.”

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

What must I do to inherit eternal life? Is your Lutheran antenna going up? I hope so. I hope you sit there today and hear that question, and you are just itching to scream out a one-word answer to this guy. Right? One word. It begins with an “n.” Are you ready?

What must I do to inherit eternal life?

RESPONSE: Nothing!

Nothing! There is nothing. (Period) You. (Period) Can do. (Period) to earn the deep and abiding love of God in Christ Jesus. It is a gift, pure and simple. Right here at the start, it is a gift. God's love is a gift. God's presence with us is a gift. And there is nothing you can do to inherit it. And I'll add, there is actually nothing you can do to inherit anything. To inherit something someone has to die. Think about that.

*"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"* We know the answer, so it's easy enough to write this guy off. Obviously, he missed confirmation class. But don't write him off yet. He is not a foil. He is not a caricature. He is honest and sincere. He kneels before Jesus. He is humble. He calls Jesus "good teacher." This guy cares. And in many ways he is like us.

Imagine you are kneeling in front of Jesus. What would you ask him? Or, try it this way, try it this way: Imagine it is mid-afternoon today. The Vikings are breaking your heart as usual, so you decide you're going to go out and take a walk. You bundle up and you go out for a walk. Heading down the street, you find yourself in the company of a stranger, and you're having a conversation. But then, like on the road to Emmaus, it turns out that this is Jesus, and you're walking and you're talking. And, in the midst of this conversation, what would you want to know? What would you want to know?

One thing you might ask is this: "How do I live well?" Like millions, like billions of people before you who have looked at Jesus, or looked at the stars, or looked deep inside of themselves, and said, "I want to know the secret to life." How do I live a life worthy of my time on this planet? It's a question we all ask. Maybe not how we get eternal life, but how do we live it?

And here is the beautiful part of this text today. Jesus does not give a four-point guide on how to live the good life. Jesus does not say, "Well, here are the secrets of the universe." *"Jesus, looking at him, loved him."*

Jesus loved him. This is the only person singled out in the whole Gospel of Mark as beloved. It is this man on the street looking for the secret of life. And Jesus loved him. So perhaps the secret of life is this – let yourself be loved. It is a gift, an unearned, un-purchased, undeserved gift. Jesus loved him.

And it is only because Jesus loved him that Jesus says the next thing. *"Go, sell all you have, give to the poor, and follow me."*

Just a note here: The Greek does not include the words, "the money," "give the money to the poor," as our translation has today. There is even an asterisk in the NRSV that says those words aren't here. The Greek simply says, "sell what you have and give to the poor." Personally, I think Jesus is asking this guy to give way more than money. But we'll come back to that.

*“Go, sell all you have, give to the poor, and follow me.”* Why is Jesus asking this of him? Is he trying to tell him that life is more than possessions? Life is more than a safe life, or having respect or standing in the community? What is it that we hope for in this life? What does “fullness of life” look like?

In the Old Testament, the good life, the greatest blessing one could have, was this: *“May you build your house and live in it.”* It said it’s a blessing all through the Old Testament. *“May you build a house and live in it.”* You will notice in the Amos reading today, it was turned around as a curse. *“You will build a house, but you will not live in it.”*

This idea of living in your own house was a blessing in those days because it was so rare. Between war, and disease, and starvation, and natural disaster, you might build a house, but very few had a chance to live in it. Imagine saying this, “May you build a house and live in it,” to someone in Myanmar, or Syria, or even in the panhandle of Florida. “May you build a house and live in it.”

It is a small hope: to live in safety, with all I need, with my family around me. I wonder if this man who approached Jesus was asking, “How do I receive this blessing?” “What must I do to live a long and happy life, in my own home, with my grandchildren around me?”

And Jesus loved him. And, out of love, Jesus makes his world a little bigger. *“Go, sell what you have, give to the poor, and follow me.”* Jesus is asking him not just to imagine his own life, but his life connected to others. Later in the text, Jesus talks about when you follow him you will receive a hundredfold in houses and brothers and sisters and children. He is talking about being in community. The idea of this beloved community where all are loved, all are wanted, all are cared for, and we’re all in it together.

Sell what you have means share. Boldly. And I don’t think he’s just talking about money here. Yes! Give your money. But give your wisdom, your time, your friendship, your advantages, your love, to all who are poor as well. In community, we are together. Perhaps this fullness of life is not what we have, but what we give. Not who we keep out, but who we include.

Let me try it this way. The entrance of heaven is often described as the pearly gates. Right? The pearly gates, with Saint Peter standing outside. It comes from Revelation 21. *“And the twelve gates are twelve pearls . . . and the street of the city is pure gold.”* And we have Saint Peter, with the keys to the kingdom, outside, checking people in. You’re good, you’re bad. You’re in, you’re out. It’s the popular culture picture of heaven.

But Revelation 21 also says that those gates are never closed. What if Jesus is picturing for us not a gated community, where you have to have the right credentials to get in? But maybe instead, Jesus is picturing a community fair, where everybody shows up, and the more the merrier.

It's no fun if only you show up to a community fair. The State Fair, with just you and your family, not so great. Life is lived together. Good life is lived together. Eternal life is lived together.

And no, it's not easy. Opening myself to others is not easy. Sharing what I have, especially money, is not easy. We don't know what will come in the future.

Trying to understand somebody else is hard. Building beloved community is hard. It can only be done while we are held in the deep abiding love of God. It can only be done in constant prayer and real trust that it is God guiding us.

It can only be done with the words of Jesus ringing in our ears:

*"For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible."*

Amen.