
Life at Last

Mark 10:17-31

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on October 10, 2021 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

One joy of my work is meeting folks who have asked me to officiate their weddings at the Chapel. I delight in learning their stories and having important conversations with them related to their lives together. I have a basic pattern of meeting with the couples that is intended to plant seeds for future conversations for them. The first meeting is always focused on their individual stories and learning how they moved from I to we, from me to us, and how that led them to seek marriage. In a second meeting, we talk about the ceremony. In great detail, we walk through the vows they will be making to each other. This is such a beautiful time of hearing the couple's thoughts on what they will mean when they make the deep and significant promises of their wedding vows before God and to each other. The conversation about the vows is always thoughtful and intimate. By the third and final meeting with a couple, I know them well enough and have talked about deep enough subjects with them that I feel prepared to have a final pre-marriage conversation. It is then, and only then, that I talk with them about marital fidelity and finances. You see, I know that talking about such things as emotional and physical intimacy and money are best saved for after I've gotten to know the couple. I'm wise enough to know that talking too early to a couple about their money and what they will do with it is a sure way to get them to find another minister.

But Jesus has a different kind of wisdom than I do. He so often cuts straight to the heart of the matter without any of the delays I assume are necessary. So when a man eager to learn from Jesus ran up to him and asked him how to inherit eternal life, Jesus didn't pause to hear the man's life story or to get to know him better before having the conversation about wealth. I don't want to be critical of Jesus here, but really, Jesus? You've known this man for a couple of minutes at best, and you're already talking to him about his money? A little presumptuous don't you think? But Jesus recognized something I never would have. He knew he was dealing with matters of life and death. So Jesus looked at the man and loved him. And because he loved him, he spoke to him about his possessions. Perhaps we think what Jesus called the man to do was anything but loving—sell all you own and give it to the poor—yet this is the only person in all of Mark's Gospel who we are told that Jesus looked on with love. Jesus loved this man enough to create a crisis of decision, to intervene in this man's life where others would not have been so bold to tread. Jesus loved this man enough to invite him to be free of what possessed him, so he could experience eternal life.

Mark tells us that Jesus was walking on the way, when a man ran up to him and fell to his knees. In this posture, he honored Jesus's authority as a teacher and demonstrated the sincerity of his seeking as a student. The man approached Jesus as one ready to receive an education about eternal life. "Good teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus quickly corrected the man and took a moment to redirect the man's attention to the one who alone is good, that is to God. After reminding this devout man of the God who alone is to be worshipped and adored, Jesus then reminded the man of the commandments related to relationships between people. "You shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, or defraud. And honor your father and mother." The ten commandments summed up by reminding the man of God alone and then the other six. The pious man responded: "I've kept all these since my youth." And the only thing we can do from the context of the story is believe him. Jesus doesn't scoff at the man or look

dismissively upon him or even have pity on him because he errantly believed he'd kept all the commandments. The story does not tell us any of that. We only know that Jesus looked on him with love and then called him to a life that will cost him everything. "Go. Sell what you own. Give to the poor. Then come follow me."

Jesus's words shocked the man. He walked away grieving. He was filled with the kind of grief that comes when you realize you can't live up to what's being asked of you. It's the kind of deep-seated sorrow that comes when you realize you've lost everything you held dear. It's the kind of grief that fills you when you've let yourself and the ones you love the most down. It's the soul-shaking sorrow the disciples felt when they were told that one of them would betray the Lord. This man, grieved to the core, walked away sad because, as the scriptures tell us, he had many possessions. How terrible it must be to realize you desire your stuff more than you desire eternal life. This man was seeking the life that lasts forever, but when he was invited to the way that leads to life, he walked away.

I wonder what about Jesus's calling made the man walk away grieving? As you can imagine, much like our time, money and possessions carried great political and social significance. Wealth not only protected people from the precarious conditions of everyday life—providing for things like food and shelter—it also afforded opportunity for the security of social and political status and power. In many ways, having possessions seemed like a way to ensure life, and being without possessions was a way to ensure death. In a world dominated by firsts and lasts, winners and losers, a social-Darwinism type of survival of the fittest, being without possessions surely seems like the way of eternal death. Eliminating the social, political, and material life that seemed to be created by possessions must have felt like certain death for the man. So much of his identity, so much of our identity, gets wrapped up in our possessions, our wealth, and the political and social opportunities connected to them. This is surely some of what Jesus called earlier in Mark "the lure of riches" (Mark 4:17) that chokes the seed of God's word planted in people.

What's more than selling his possessions, Jesus told the man to give what he received to the poor. Jesus told him to redistribute his wealth among those on the outside of the realms of political and social power. Instead of hob-knobbing with the elite, he was to join the ranks of the socially and materially downtrodden. Solidarity with those who sleep in the streets, with those held in poverty's prison, is a sure way to join the lasts in being last. You can almost hear the man thinking, "I was asking for life that lasts. Not life with the lasts." Yet, Jesus called the man to sell this supposed eternal life of social and political status and power and instead have the treasures of heaven among those who have been deprived. Perhaps, when counting this cost, that felt a lot more like death than life to the man. So there was a lot to grieve.

In response to the man walking away, Jesus said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" The disciples were baffled and befuddled by Jesus's word. So he tried again, but in a different way, as if talking to his kids using an analogy, an object lesson of sorts. Can't you see Jesus holding up a needle and saying, "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." Can't you hear the disciples choking on these words, astonished at what Jesus said? I can see them shaking their heads in disbelief. I can feel myself shaking my head with them. After all, they believed, and we often still believe, that money and possessions (and their corresponding power and status) are signs of God's favor and blessing. Wealth and riches are supposed to reveal that God has blessed you, right? It's why we put #blessed

on the bottom of the pictures from our grand vacations or our new vehicles. And if God has blessed you, if you have favor in God's sight, then you must be on the path of everlasting life, right? Surely you are being made well, being made whole, being saved. But Jesus turned this notion on its head, and disciples then and now struggle to comprehend it.

Of course, as we would do, Jesus's followers through the years have tried to round the edges off this challenging word.¹ We've inserted words in the scripture passage to make the issue about trusting wealth instead of God, so the King James Version of verse 24 says, "How hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter the Kingdom of God?" instead of "How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!" More clever than this is the person who in the ninth century made up a story about a gate called the "eye of a needle" that if a camel got on its knees it could enter through it. The point being that wealthy people just need to be humble in our wealth to participate in the kingdom of God. (Let me tell you, I like that message a lot better than the other one.) And my favorite is how we imagine that I could never be the rich person in the story because there are always people wealthier than I. No matter what ways we try to get around Jesus's teaching, and we've tried many more than these, it confronts us with the reality of the calling of God's kingdom way. So with the honesty of the wealthy man, we consider walking away or with the same exasperation and desperation of Jesus's first followers we say, "Then who can be made well? Who can be healed? Who can be saved?"

Jesus loved the man enough to invite him into the way of eternal life, even when entering that way required him to let go of everything, to withhold nothing. Like so many others throughout the Gospels, but in a particular way for this man, Jesus invited this would-be follower to give everything until he found his identity, his value, his life, in Christ alone. Jesus loves us would-be followers enough to invite us into the way of eternal life, too. On this way of eternal life, the designations of first and last, insider and outsider, wealthy and poor lose their power because on this way instead of being competitors with one another we become companions of one another. On this way we are welcomed into a new kind of community of compassionate companionship. The way of eternal life is rich and poor sharing together—mutually bound in the kinship of God's family. It's the first and last switching places because the labels are lost in the life everlasting. It's giving up family, friends, and social connections to follow Jesus only to receive a community a hundred-fold more expansive.

Jesus looks on us with love, and Jesus loves us too much to offer anything less than full life in him and in his way. So he invites you and me, all of us, to give everything until we find our identity, our value, our life in Christ alone. This invitation is to a wholesale change of heart and mind. It's a total reshaping of how we see the world until we see as Christ sees and live as he lives. It's a call to repentance. Jesus said it this way, "The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news."

With the disciples we ask, "Then who can be saved? Who can be healed? Who can be made well?" And Jesus looks at us, and with the same love and compassion he had for the man who walked away, he says, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." While the calling of Christ demands that we surrender all, it is by God's goodness and grace alone that saying "yes" is even possible. For mortals it is impossible, but not for God. With God, we just might be able to join Jesus on the way. By the breath and life of God's Spirit, we may,

¹ Mark Skinner, "Commentary on Mark 10:17-31," Working Preacher, October 11, 2009, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-28-2/commentary-on-mark-1017-31-4>.

miraculously, say, “Yes.” When Jesus says to let go of all that we hold dear, even what we think gives us life, by God’s presence and action in our life, that is to say by God’s grace we may say “yes.” Who knows, Jesus might just ask us to give it all away or to leave everything we’ve known and loved and found our purpose and meaning and status and worth in. And if he does, perhaps, by God’s grace, we might just say, “Yes.” And in our Spirit-enabled “yes,” we will experience the fullness of life at last.