

“Attachments”
Proper 23B
Mark 10:17-31
Rev’d. Tanya Stormo Rasmussen
The Congregational Church of Hollis
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In this morning’s Gospel reading, there’s an urgency, a sort of desperation, about the man who approaches Jesus, just as the Great Healer is about to set out on a journey. Mark tells us that the man “ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’”¹ In the scenes leading up to this one in Chapter Ten, a series of individuals have come and knelt before Jesus, asking him to heal them, or someone they loved. The author wants us to understand that—while the man in the story may have *thought* he was merely asking a point of information question or seeking reassurance that he was indeed a good person with a place assigned for him in heaven—like all of the other people who knelt before Jesus this wealthy man was in fact in search of healing.

Whether he had identified it as a soul sickness or not, the man had nevertheless noticed a vague unease in his being, a certain *dis*-ease, if you will. He knew he had everything a man could want, materially speaking. But still, he needed something more. In the midst of material abundance, he was aware of a scarcity within. He yearned for a deep and abiding sense of peace, a wellness in his soul. He said he wanted assurance of eternal life. But how much did he really understand about eternal life—and the ways in which eternal life and the kingdom of heaven are entirely bound up with the here and now?

It’s as if the man had been trying to solve this problem on his own for a while—this gnawing anxiety about an ultimate concern—but hadn’t been able to puzzle out the solution yet. And now that Jesus was departing, it might be his last chance. He’d been obviously been observing Jesus for a while, listening to what he said, witnessing his power to make broken and hurting people whole. He’d taken note of Jesus’ integrity, how what he said and how he lived lined up squarely. He saw that Jesus managed to demonstrate respect and dignity toward every person he encountered, neither kowtowing to the powerful nor dismissing the supposedly contemptible, but honoring each one as an equally precious child of God. Not only that, but Jesus managed to answer difficult (even ultimate) questions with wisdom and depth. He recognized in Jesus someone who was connected to the divine, to the Eternal, to God. Which is why he appealed to him as one having authority: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Fred Craddock, the esteemed homiletics professor, points out that, “The man asked a big question and he got a big answer; small answers to ultimate questions are insulting.”²

¹ Mark 10:17.

² As quoted by Kathryn Matthews Huey at:

http://www.ucc.org/weekly_seeds_what_must_i_do?utm_campaign=ws_oct2_15&utm_medium=email&utm_source=unitedchurchofchrist

Not unlike many of us, the man was in search of some assurance that the life he lived today would merit something more eternal. He'd been raised in a culture that believed that material wealth was a sign of divine favor, and that anyone who worked hard would be justly rewarded. Like a lot of people in our world today, he bought into the idea that he somehow deserved, or merited, his material abundance. What he failed to realize is that his attachment to his worldly stuff was getting in the way of experience of spiritual bounty. All he felt was anxious scarcity, and a fear of not having enough when the days of his life on earth were finished.

He surely knew a number of honest, hard-working individuals who never managed to amass any wealth. But the man's question for Jesus wasn't about the apparent randomness of divine favour, or why he should be so blessed when others also worked to be faithful but couldn't seem to catch a break. The man only seemed to be aware that he *himself* was missing something; that something within *him* was not quite right—which was unsettling to him. It was a very *self*-centered concern with eternal life, asked by an individual who seemed to have it all (at least, by the world's accounting) in this life.

Kathryn Matthews Huey asserts that the rich man's question is *the* big question: it's the heart of the matter, for you and me, too—and the answer isn't some nuanced or obscure teaching for specialists in theology.³ The rich man's question is one that arguably gnaws at the souls of any of us who possess all the sorts of security the world has to offer, and yet still feel insecure about our future: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Ernest Hemingway is quoted as having said, "Fear of death increases in exact proportion to increase in wealth." I'm not convinced that's true for everyone, any more than I'm convinced that destitute people are less fearful of death than you or I are. But there is something in Hemingway's sentiment that resonates just enough to rattle us, just as there's something in Jesus' response to the rich man that makes most of us a little bit nervous. We know that, in comparison to the rest of the world (even if not in comparison to our close neighbors), every one of us is among the rich of the world.

I wonder whether the rich man's response would have been different had Jesus responded, as he often did to others' questions, with another question. (Technically, I guess he did answer with a question: he first asked the man why he called him "good" because only God is good.) But what if Jesus had asked, "What are you most attached to in this world? You need to detach yourself from it, and start attaching yourself solely and entirely to the concerns of God." Only when you are free of your attachment to *things* can you experience true abundance and the sort of wealth and riches that really last.

Jesus didn't ask the man about his deepest loyalty or greatest attachment, because the man wouldn't have recognized it. It was only when Jesus named the obvious by telling him to sell everything and give it to the poor, that it became clear the man had attached far

³ Ibid.

greater hope and security in his possessions than he had in pursuing the things that matter most to God.

The passage doesn't tell us *why* the man was shocked and grieving, only that he went away. The most common reading is that he was upset over not getting a simple affirmation from Jesus about his way of being; he was shocked and grieved over not being told that he was okay just as he was, especially as he'd worked hard to be a good, pious person. The thought of having to relinquish everything that gave him a sense of security, status, and self-worth in this world seemed too high a price to pay. Or, maybe it made him wonder about what his eternal life would look like if he no longer was a big-shot in this life. (Remember, Jesus has been teaching his disciples about the least being the greatest and vice-versa in heaven, but this guy may have missed that lesson.)

But it's also possible that he was shocked and grieved by what he saw, as Jesus held up a mirror revealing his true attachments. Maybe the man was appalled by the fact that he'd never before considered the needs of the poor, nor his call and responsibility to do something about their plight as an ambassador of God. And, maybe he made the connection between his concern for eternal life, and the fact that what we value—what we attach ourselves to (or allow to become attached to us) today, here and now—can greatly impinge on our access to heaven, both now and in the life to come. Perhaps he was shocked and grieved that he'd got it so wrong, and he went away sad but determined to change his life. It's possible.

It's interesting to note that when Jesus talks with his disciples after the shocked and grieving man has departed, Jesus says, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" It says the disciples were perplexed at these words—after which Jesus repeats himself twice more, 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."⁴

Did you notice the shift that was made? The rich man asked Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life, and Jesus talked about how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God. This is significant, because the first words we hear from Jesus in Mark's gospel are: "The time is fulfilled, **and the kingdom of God has come near**; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:9) Sprinkled throughout the rest of Mark's Gospel account, Jesus suggests that various individuals are not far from the kingdom of God, and describes what the kingdom of God is like (a mustard seed, or a sower scattering seed), etc. **The point is, the rich man is concerning himself with his eternal life, and Jesus is pointing out that eternal life is entirely bound up with the life we're living now.** Throughout the Gospel of Mark, Jesus talks about heaven, and eternal life, and the kingdom of God interchangeably—they are all bound up together. The kingdom of God, heaven, and our participation in eternal life are already at play in this world: here, now.

⁴ Mark 10:23-25.

In a world that still teaches us to assess the value of just about everything (including a person's worth) by how much it can net financially, it's no less shocking or challenging today than it was in Jesus' day to think about selling everything and giving it all away in order to obtain what we ultimately yearn for and need. And yet, there's no doubt in Jesus' mind as he encourages the rich man to liberate himself from the one thing that's holding him back from knowing the abundant life his soul is longing for. He can't experience it so long as his attachments remain firmly fastened.

It can be difficult to preach this text in Stewardship season, because there's the danger that people might hear overtones of judgment, or a subtext of guilt and shame implied, especially for affluent communities or individuals.

But for those of us who acknowledge the critical tension in our lives between our honest desire to be faithful disciples of Jesus, and our devotion to our stuff—for those of us who strive to live after Jesus' example, but recognize with chagrin how easily our possessions come to possess us, how often we wind up giving our *things* our first attention—there is Good News in our Gospel lesson this morning.

Let's revisit the scene one last time. "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; honour your father and mother.'" He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." ***Then 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.'⁵

Just as Jesus looked at the rich man and loved him, so are you and I gazed upon in love, compassion, and grace-filled understanding. Regardless of whether we've fulfilled the letter of the law impeccably since childhood, or whether we're one of those whom the rest of the world sees as a lost cause, or somewhere in between, Jesus looks at us, and loves us. That's the gospel truth.

Sure, he also challenges us to acknowledge and relinquish the attachments that bind us and hold us back from true freedom, from a real experience of heaven in the here-and-now, from the assurance of eternal life hereafter. Divine healing, wholeness of our souls, is ours for the taking, all we need to do is accept it. But even if we turn and walk away, that love doesn't abandon us. That grace does not waver. That opportunity to embrace the life that is truly alive is always there waiting for us, and it's not going to be revoked.

What else can we say but, "Thanks be to God!"? Amen.

⁵ (Mark 10:17-21).