

Hebrews 4:12-16 ~ Mark 10:17-31

Are We Good?

21st Sunday after Pentecost ~ Solar Panel Array Dedication Day ~ October 13, 2024

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Introduction to Second Scripture Lesson:

Are you ready for some good news for a change? Especially today, whatever your favorite media sites may be, I'm willing to bet, good news is not what you're getting much of these days. With the election less than a month away, you may have even chosen to take a media break, or at least limit how often you let yourself read it or watch it or listen to it. Especially here in Wisconsin, one of the "swing states" we are gifted with a torrent of news from both sides. Across all fifty states we are devastated by the news of the literal flooding and massive destruction caused by two horrendous Hurricanes in two weeks' time. We are also bombarded with news of wars within and between countries with no end in sight. And outbreaks of gun violence that happen so frequently many of them don't even make the news.

But today is Sunday and I have some Good News, some great news to share with you from the Gospel called Mark. Did you know that the word "gospel" means "Good News?" The 1970 musical, titled "Godspell" reminds us that this word comes from the Old English "God" and "news or story." Our gospels tell the story that is God's story that is Good News not for only some. God's Good News is not for just one side, not just for "us" but also for "them." Whatever divides comes to mind, contrary to what you may have heard or been taught about Christianity: our gospels tell the story that is good news for all creation. Sounds impossible, right? Just as this *whole* world depends on our one super star in the sky, the sun, for life, warmth, energy, and food. God became Love Visible, the Son of God, (Jesus Christ Superstar!) to save us, to heal, to reconcile, and restore our broken world.

I will warn you: "Good News" when it comes from Jesus, is not typically about puppies and kittens and unicorns. Nor is the story you are about to hear. It comes as the shadows are starting to form in Mark--when Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem. We're past the part of Mark where Jesus doesn't say much and is mostly doing miraculous healings and fun things like feeding five thousand with five loaves. To be honest, once Jesus really starts talking in Mark, you may wish he would say less, or at least tone it down. Like today's gospel lesson. You will notice he manages to "shock," "perplex" and "astound" everyone within earshot, including his disciples with this piece of good news

Sermon:

Something must have happened. Something urgent. Or maybe it had been building over time, and just reached the boiling point. The man appears to be on the verge of a panic attack. Wealthy people didn't run back then. And they certainly didn't kneel at the feet of a rough-around-the-edges itinerant, Rabbi. But this man, this rich man does. He runs, he kneels, he asks Jesus a burning question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Or more accurately, he was probably thinking (the question behind the question), "What *MORE* must I do to inherit

eternal life?" He is sincere, well-intended, follows the rules, and wants to do the right thing. Sounds kind of like a Presbyterian...

Then comes the line that shines like a laser beam of light, "Jesus looking at him, loved him, and said, "You lack one thing." The word for love in the Greek here is "*agape*." Rarely used in Mark. But it is here. *Agape* means love that is self-less, unconditional, and sacrificial for others. Jesus looked at him, saw him, loved him. Surely with that loving look and the promise of just one thing, the rich man probably thought: "Great, one thing? I can add one thing, surely. How hard can that be?" Jesus could see his spirit naked and laid bare: That beautiful, image of God who is love: in this man was blocked, shadowed, yearning to burst forth. If only, the man could catch even a glimmer of God's image right there, buried under his troubled spirit. The live spark that likely brought him to his knees on Jesus' path that day.

When Jesus told him the news, the Good News, it didn't sound good at all. It shocked him. No, you can't buy it. You can't add it on top. It's *not* another box to check. It's not an investment at all. It's a divestment of all that blocks your spirit from being free to love and serve God. I see you are blessed with material wealth. This is a gift you must use to bring light and life to those who are poor and in need, to the least of these. Do this one thing and you will live! Yes, this is essentially a call story. This man exits the story and our gospel account, shocked, and grieving. But then what?

I wonder what he was grieving at that moment. We are not told. Was he grieving that he couldn't give up his stuff and so that was a "hard no" from Jesus? That is the traditional understanding of this man's story. Whose story is also told in Matthew, who calls him "young" and in Luke, who describes him as a "ruler." Whether he was young or old, a ruler or a tax collector--the one thing all three accounts agree on is that the man was wealthy, rich in material possessions. And he takes a quick exit stage right. Could he have gone away grieving the loss of his possessions and his life prior to this encounter, because he was considering saying "yes" to Jesus' summons to come and follow him?

Saying "yes" to a new spiritual path that was centered on a relationship rather than on a series of rules to follow, boxes to check. And saying "no" to the common understanding that material wealth was a sign of God's blessing. That was a lot for him to get his mind around. His response and his quick exit remind me of Nicodemus John's gospel. Remember how perplexed Nicodemus was to Jesus' good news to him about being born again? In John we learn how Nicodemus did evolve from "no" to "yes" by the time Jesus was crucified. Where our rich man was in his relationship to Christ on the dark Friday at noon, we don't know.

I think for most of us it takes a beat or two when we have an epiphany, or a sudden revelation opens the eye of our heart to seeing ourselves the way Jesus does. To feel compassion, acceptance, acknowledgement that we are indeed chips off the divine block. That our goodness is deep inside intricately woven into those 23 pairs of chromosomes, the DNA of all God's children. As Presbyterians, we baptize infants to lay claim to this unbelievably good news of God's unearned gift of grace. We practice open Communion, a Table to which we invite

on Jesus' behalf all who hunger for the bread of life. Every Sunday I verbally welcome newcomers with the unconditional love of Christ at the opening greeting. All of these practices help us to taste and see and feel the truth of Jesus' loving gaze, on all of God's children.

Which in the very same breath is Jesus' call to action: To the disciples then and now: Stop trying to thread a camel through the eye of a needle. That's what you and I are doing every time we try to *earn* our way into God's eternal realm. If that sounds absolutely impossible: it is. That was Jesus' point. God's grace is pure gift. It cannot be earned. A camel cannot be threaded through the eye of a needle. Impossible. You may have heard scholarly attempts to soften that image: that Jesus really was referring to a gate in Jerusalem – something a camel could walk through. That would have been impossible because the gate to which they are referring didn't exist until over a century later. Or that the word for camel could also be translated as rope. Nope. He meant a camel. And a needle. In other words: he used unforgettable, graphic image to help us see it's impossible by human effort to "earn" eternal life.

You've got to love Peter here. It's surprising he's kept his mouth shut this long. But then, here it comes, he busts out with another great Peterism: "Okay, but Jesus, don't forget, unlike this rich guy, we DID leave our stuff and follow you. So, *we're* good, right?" Jesus responds again, and lovingly I am sure: that's not the point. It's about God. Not about us. Nor is it simply that having money is the only thing that blocks the Son of God from shining through our lives. Jesus is not condemning wealth or all wealthy people. Let's remember: Money is not the root of evil, but the *love* of money is the root of evil. The Word again calling us to dissect and examine our relationship with money.

You may have heard it in *Funny Girl*, the movie about Fanny Brice in 1953 who said the "I've been poor and I've been rich. Rich is better!" Yes? Not quite the camel through the needle, but still memorable. Actually can be traced to 1937 Beatrice Kaufman (Leonard Lyons syndicated gossip column.) Lots of other people have said this. But Jesus counters with a "flip the script" idea of what it means to be rich: "The way to be rich is to die to wealth." Friends: as Lamar Williamson, Jr. has written, "If this message does not take our breath away, if we are not shocked, appalled, grieved, or amazed, we have either not yet heard it or heard it so often we don't hear it anymore." ⁱ

Eternal life is justice in human relationships: on earth and in heaven. Yes, right here and now and for eternity. That's what Jesus was teaching the man with many possessions. It's not about rules as much as about relationships with God, others, self. What in your life needs to be rooted out because it is a hindrance to following Jesus' way of divine love, compassion, and mercy? In order for the light of God to shine through you? What is blocking your ability to reflect and refract the love of Jesus to others? For that man, apparently, it was his relationship to his stuff, his possessions. What is coming between you and God, between you and others who are suffering? Our privilege? Our racial bias? Our class consciousness? Our political affiliation?

I have good news from Jesus: to the question, “Are we good?” The answer is: “Yes, you are good. You were born good. Now take that goodness and make the world better with your goodness.” I am delighted to connect this call from Jesus, to what we are celebrating this day: the extreme generosity of many with our church community and beyond to literally let light shine through solar panels to power our building, reduce our carbon footprint, and free up dollars to do God’s work beyond our church walls. To helps us do a better job of being Christ’s hands and feet in our community and the world. Every dollar donated, we calculate multiplies three-fold in furthering our mission and ministry.

I will close with a blessing of good news, expressed as only The Late South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu can do. It comes from *The Book of Joy*. This is a blessing for you and for us this day: let it inside, all the way in, past whatever resistance may block it.

Dear Child of God, you are loved with a love that nothing can shake, a love that loved you long before you were created, a love that will be there long after everything has disappeared. You are precious, with a preciousness that is totally quite immeasurable. And God wants you to be like God. Filled with life and goodness and laughter—and joy. God, who is forever pouring our God’s whole being from all eternity, wants you to flourish. God wants you to be filled with joy and excitement and ever longing to be able to find what is so beautiful in God’s creation: the compassion of so many, the caring, the sharing. And God says, please my child, help me. Help me to spread love and laughter and joy and compassion. And you know what, my child? As you do this—hey presto—you discover joy. Joy, which you had not sought, comes as the gift, almost the reward for this non-self-regarding caring for others.ⁱⁱ

ⁱ Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1983), p.188.

ⁱⁱ Archbishop Desmond Tutu, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, with Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*, (Avery/Penguin Random House: New York, NY, 2016), p 298.