



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

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“The Invitation of Costly Grace”

A Sermon delivered by Rev. Katie Suddeth at Myers Park Baptist Church

On November 24, 2024, from Mark 10:17-25

Have you ever had to make a change that you knew was going to be painful? You knew that at the end of the day your quality of life would be so much better after you made the change, but the act of that change was going to hurt something terrible?

I recently found a show on Hulu that I haven’t watched in a long time called “My Name is Earl”. My grandparents and I used to watch this show, and they would get so tickled by the situations Earl found himself in. If you have not watched the show, Earl is the main character. He was not a super great person, in and out of jail, breaking the law and not caring about who got hurt. Until one day, he got hit by a car. The craziest part is it was on the same day he won the lottery.

Earl getting hit by a car seems like Paul’s story of being hit off his donkey in the Bible. Because this was a life-changing moment for Earl, he decides to dedicate his life, and the lottery wins to make all the wrong things he did to people right. He enlists his brother Randy to help. He even makes a long list of everything he ever did wrong from childhood to adulthood, making sure to include the people he hurt on the list, so that he can make sure he makes it right with every single person he wronged. Of course, it is a comedy, so Earl and Randy get into some very funny situations. However, the show also shows some moments of real pain for Earl. It shows people or situations on the list he wants to avoid, because he is afraid to see that person again.

There is one episode in particular that I can never get out of my head. See, Earl had committed a crime but tells the police officers that it was his friend who did it. That friend goes to jail for 7 years. When the friend gets out of jail and Earl goes to explain what happened, to tell him that he was responsible for him going to jail, the friend tells Earl that he forgives him. He explains to Earl that he had been breaking the law anyway, so eventually he would have been caught. He tells Earl that in prison, he came to know Jesus. He says to Earl that even though prison was hard and painful, it gave him his ultimate freedom by putting him on a more loving and life-giving path than he had before. Just to be clear, I am not telling you this to say you should break the law or go to prison to have your life changed. Not at all. I tell you this story because sometimes the hardest things we go through are the very things that transform us. The things that make life worth living.

In our scripture today, we see a man, who had many possessions, approaching Jesus and asking what he should do to inherit eternal life. The key part of this story that is missing in most modern western contexts is that during the time this was written, it was believed that if a person had many possessions, then that person was seen as virtuous and pious. They were seen as someone who has been rewarded for their goodness. With that in mind when we see this man approach Jesus and say what must I do to inherit eternal life, he might have been expecting Jesus to give him a gold star for keeping all the commandments. He might have approached Jesus with pride. OR maybe he approached Jesus because he knew something was missing. Maybe he knew that society said he was good and just, but his spirit still was left longing.



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The scripture tells us that Jesus looked at the man with love. He looked at the man with love and told him to go sell all his possessions and follow him. Many sermons that are preached on this are either about not making wealth an idol or that Jesus was testing the man. A test in which we are led to believe the man failed. But I wonder if this was not a test at all. What if Jesus was not testing the man, but extending an invitation to the man...

Jesus is inviting the man to step into the liberating freedom of the Kingdom of God. Jesus can see that this man is not able to live the full life of the kingdom, because he is being held captive by the pride that comes from within him. The pride of having many possessions and possibly from being seen as virtuous for that reason. Jesus is not testing him to see if he will do it but giving him an answer to his question. Jesus is saying this to the man while looking at him with love.

What Jesus knows is that life in the kingdom of God is more than following a set of rules. It is about transformation and character change. It is about letting the love and grace of God move through you and transform you. It is about spreading that love and grace to the world around you. It is about more than looking good. And I wonder, I wonder if we have been taught that the man left sad because we think he is not going to do it. I wonder if we assume that the rich man leaves and goes back to his possessions and that's it. But what if the rich man leaves sad because he is going to do it? The scripture does not tell us that, but it does say that he went away grieving for he had many possessions.

What if this grieving was because the rich man knew what he had to do? What if it was because it was going to be painful? Transformation can be hard and painful, especially when it makes you confront what you have always known to be true. When we are challenged like that and forced to make a choice, we are going to grieve at least a little. Living a life of the kingdom requires transformation. It requires us to put others above ourselves in a society that tells us the opposite. The key to the Rich man's freedom to live a full kingdom life is to go against the grain of society. Society has told him that because he has all of these things then he is good and worthy. It has taught him to find comfort and security in those things. This is much like our society today.

Jesus invites the man to toss that what society has ingrained in him to the side, to not listen to what the world has told him, and to join Jesus. This is what theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, called Costly Grace. Costly Grace is different from Cheap Grace. Of course, God's unconditional grace flows to us freely. Cheap Grace is receiving God's grace, but never being transformed. Costly Grace is receiving God's grace and being transformed. It requires transformation and action from us. It requires us to pick up our cross and follow him.

Bonhoeffer's use of the word costly here is powerful, because to truly follow Jesus' path of love and liberation, to follow Jesus' invitation to the rich man means it will cost you. It will call you to live and love differently than those around you. It will cause you to have to be transformed. Yet, it is still grace. It is still unconditional love and forgiveness. It is still Jesus inviting us to experience freedom from the things that hold us back. Only when we let go of what holds us back can we truly experience the full love and grace of God. *pause*



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There is more to the scripture today than just the rich man. On the flip side, after the man leaves, we see the disciples struggle with Jesus' answer to the rich man. They too had been conditioned by society. They saw the rich man as a virtuous person, who kept the commandments and did all the right things. They were perplexed at the idea, then Jesus hit them with this weird comment about a camel through the eye of a needle, no wonder they were a tad confused and worried... We see them switch from the kingdom language they had used in earlier parts of Mark to saved language. They ask him "then who can be saved?" They are not asking because they are worried about others, but they are worried about their own salvation. When we start to think of faith as transactional, we lose the point. If we only have faith, so that when we die, we will go to Heaven, then we miss out on so much beauty.

We miss that the kingdom of God is here now with us. We are not only saved once, but ongoingly. It is an ongoing process of what John Wesley called sanctification- allowing God's grace to work in you and through you. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven..." We pray these words every Sunday, but do we fully understand what we are asking when we do? We are asking for God to transform us. We are asking for God to extend an invitation to us, just as Jesus did the rich man. We are asking to go deeper into the full life of faith and the kingdom of God. We are asking to be God's hands and feet in the world. Yes, this request can require some very painful transformation and changes. Yes, it will require us to give of our time and resources. But it leads us to a more fulfilling life full of love and liberation. There is still some good news.

First, in the very last verse of today's scripture. Jesus tells us that for us alone, all of this is impossible. He continues to say that with God all things are possible. Assuring us that we are not alone on this journey. That God is with us. God is walking with you on this journey. God sits with you in your pain and in your joy.

The second piece of good news is that if you kept reading the verses below, Jesus says that those who follow him inherit a family. That family being the family of Christ, the body of Christ- aka each other. We are to love each other and walk together on this journey. We are to support one another as we all work towards the Kingdom of God. Not to hold each other's faults over the other one's head, but to help each other on this journey we call life. God gave us the gift of each other.

The kingdom of God is here now. It is alive and well through our selfless acts of love and peace. The invitation is extended to you and to me. The ball is in our court. It doesn't mean it'll be easy. We may walk away grieving like the rich man and have to make hard changes. The question is are we willing to do it? Are we going to accept the invitation to step into freedom? One step at a time is all it takes... Amen.