
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 22

Job 23:1-9, 16-17
Psalm 22:1-15
Hebrews 4:12-16
Mark 10:17-31

“Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

Mark 4:9

Will you turn with me in your Bibles to the gospel of Mark, chapter 4.

Before we get to what we heard read today from the gospel of Mark I wanted to remind us of this parable in chapter 4.

“2 Jesus began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: 3 ‘Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. 6 And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. 8 Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.’ 9 And Jesus said, ‘Let anyone with ears to hear listen!’” (Mark 4:2-9)

In other words, “Prepare your minds to listen, so that you may understand.” But look at verse 13, clearly the disciples didn’t quite understand this parable.

Because Jesus says it himself, doesn’t he? “13 Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? 14 The sower sows the word. 15 These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. 16 And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. 17 But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. 18 And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, 19 but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. 20 And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.” (Mark 4:13-20)

Let’s focus in on the third category of soil that Jesus references - the seeds that fell among thorns. Jesus says that those seeds represent the people who hear the word of God, but the things of this world tempt and lure them away from fully trusting, and in fact, the thing that Jesus says very specifically that tempts them away is the lure wealth and that it will not only cause them to wander away, it will, in fact, choke and ultimately kill the ability to fully trust the word of God - thereby taking seemingly fertile soil and making it produce nothing.

Now, let’s turn a little bit further into the gospel of Mark to chapter 10, beginning at verse 17. This is what we heard read today.

“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?’ 18 Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 19 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.” 20 The man said to him, ‘Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.’ 21 Jesus, looking at him, loved him”

Jesus loved him. Because by many standards this is a “good guy” a “good person.” He had lived a good life, he hadn’t done horrendously bad things - for goodness sake, he’d kept most of the ten commandments - and he had enough monetary resources to really give the church’s budget a little bit of a boost. I bet he would write a check - discretely of course - so that we could rehab the bell tower without having to do any fundraising.

Jesus loved him. By worldly standards it would seem that Jesus loved him because this movement that Jesus was leading seemed to be primed to get a real catch - a “good person” and with resources - a prime candidate to get involved on the vestry as quick as possible.

Jesus loved him.

As we’ve said on many occasions, “LOVE is a demonstrated preference for the well-being of others, over and above myself, even at great personal expense, with help from the Holy Spirit.”

Love is the demonstrated preference for the well-being of others. Jesus didn’t love this man because of what he might bring to the ministry of Jesus. Jesus desired the well-being of this man, which is what prompted Jesus to say this to him, “You lack one thing.”

Love didn’t cause Jesus to tell this man that he was indeed a “good person.”

Love didn’t cause Jesus to tell this man that because he was a “good person”, of course he would be going to heaven.

Love didn’t cause Jesus to accept human morality and ethical choices (being a “good person”) as a substitute for faith.

The man was moral and ethical, Jesus didn’t dispute that. But morality and ethics weren’t enough. Lordship is what Jesus wanted.

“21 Jesus, looking at the man, 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.’ 22 When the man heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”

The man turned and went back to the thing that was lord of his life.

Who or what is lord of your life?

Who or what, when they speak, *you* instantly pay attention?

Who or what will cause you worry if you don’t have them around?

Who or what is the thing that you can’t imagine life without?

Jesus goes on to say in verse 23, “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!’ 24 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! 25 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.’

As a brief aside, the story that circulates that there was a gate in the walls of Jerusalem called “The Needle’s Eye” and that a camel had to get on its knees to go through it is nice, but that gate didn’t exist until the middle ages, long after Jesus said these words, and the notion of a crawling camel ... you get the point. There’s no hidden cultural context here. Jesus is saying precisely what caused the disciples in verse 26 to be astonished. He was saying something that was impossible - a camel fitting through the eye of a sewing needle - how could he be comparing that to a rich person entering the kingdom of God?

It’s very tempting at this point to want to temper and modify what Jesus is saying to make it more palatable, and yet, I don’t know how to get around it. Because I can’t come up with any instance where Jesus speaks positively in reference to wealth, but I can come up with numerous instances where he is

critical of it in the same tone as what we heard read today. (Mark 4:19; cf. Matthew 6:19-34; Luke 12:13-32; 16:1-15, 19-31; 19:1-10)

It's very easy to quickly create an interesting way to appropriate this passage by applying it to those whom *we* think are unethically rich. Most of us would place ourselves in a 'non-rich' category - not wealthy - and thereby we can deflect at least some of the force of what Jesus was suggesting on someone else and not on ourselves. Or, to mistakenly believe the notion of a gate in the wall of Jerusalem that a camel had to kneel to get through might then lead us to believe that all that the wealthy had to do would be to humble themselves - to kneel down - but not necessarily separate themselves from their wealth.

Money is not neutral. It will always have a pull on us to place our faith in it. It will always have a pull on us by providing us enjoyment when we come into unexpected possession of it - think of finding a \$20 bill on the ground or winning a small lottery prize. It will always have a pull on us by making us more safe when we have enough of it and therefore, to stockpile it so that our safety can be secured by it. What did it feel like this week when the stock market took a dive? I am fascinated by how much of our national awareness these days is spent on our financial posturing and positioning in a global market to make sure that *our* interests come first. Money is not neutral. We feel stronger and more secure when our finances are strong and secure. This is exactly what Jesus is talking about.

The issue here is loyalty and lordship. Possessions and wealth aren't evil, but loyalty - giving lordship - to them is. Jesus didn't beat around the bush with this man. Out of love Jesus acted decisively and clearly. This man needed radical surgery to save his life, but a less robust understanding of love would have left him with an inadequate attempt at a cure. The man thought he was healthy, but Jesus knew otherwise. Following all the laws and being a good person wasn't adequate. Why would Jesus go through everything he did and ultimately die - why would Jesus go through all that trouble with the cross - if being a good person was enough?

Another theologian says, "We do better if we confess that we are too weak to follow Jesus on his terms than if we try to find loopholes that allow us to continue in our complacency."¹ Or, Mark Twain famously said, "It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand." The man knew exactly what Jesus meant - and Jesus really meant it.

"LOVE is the demonstrated preference for the well-being of others, over and above myself, even at great personal expense, with help from the Holy Spirit." The love of God challenges us ultimately for our own good. "You lack one thing;" Jesus said, "go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." Obedience to the lordship of Christ.

Ironically, the man evidently felt he had too much to lose to follow what Jesus said that day. Remember what was on the table (so to speak), "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" The man settled for the life that he knew - the life of this world, when Jesus was offering precisely what he had asked for - eternal life. Don't ever underestimate the subtle workings of Satan in this life who manipulates the lure and temptation of possessions and wealth. But let us never doubt that the power of God through Jesus Christ is greater than the temptations of this world and to obey him and give him lordship in our lives - to follow him - IS eternal life. *Amen.*

¹ David Garland, "Mark", The NIV Application Commentary, p. 402.