

A Question of Letting Go

A sermon preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
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Mark 10:17-31

Today I continue my series on questions raised by the Gospel of Mark by looking at the story of the rich young ruler encountering Jesus. I say the rich young ruler, but Barbara Brown Taylor drew my attention to the fact that while all three gospels that contain this story assert that he is wealthy, only one of the gospels (Matthew's) calls him young, and only one of the gospels (Luke's) calls him a ruler. As you listen to the reading, notice that the question that begins the passage you are about to hear is one of acquisition, but what Jesus invites the man who asks it to do is to let go. Pay careful attention to Jesus interaction with the rich man—and to what Jesus says to the disciples afterward.

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; honor your father and mother." ' He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' 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.' When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

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!' 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! 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.' They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'

Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.' Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

It's a **bold** question that the rich young ruler man asks of Jesus. And I believe he asks it in **good faith**. Unlike other characters in the gospels, Sadducees and scribes and Pharisees, he is not trying to trick Jesus or trap him in his words. I mean, the man comes up and kneels before Jesus and calls him not just Teacher, but Good Teacher. He respects Jesus and what he's heard about this rabbi. So the man asks him his bold and honest question. *What must I do to inherit eternal life?*

It's a bold and honest query, and it is just the sort of question that a person oriented towards success and achievement might ask.

You know, the kind of driven, type-A individual who winds up in a wealthy suburb and has managed to accumulate resources and possessions in one way or another. The type of person who

knows the value of working hard, and the importance of laying something aside, and has seen it pay off in some degree of wealth. The sort of woman or man who has known over the years what it is to be evaluated, and has correspondingly learned to seek out quality. A person who won't settle for *just any teacher*, but looks for a *really good one*. Not just any college, but a really good college. I suspect you may know somebody like that. So you, too, can appreciate the rich young ruler's question.

What do I need to DO to GET eternal life?

Before we go any further, let's lay bare two of the assumptions underlying that question.

The first is that eternal life is something you can achieve or merit your way into, so that it becomes one more accomplishment, one more goal met, one more box checked.

The second assumption is like unto it. It is that eternal life is a thing that you can get, or have or possess, like all of the other possessions you acquire, rather than being a state you live into.

Jesus responds to the man by asking him, first of all, *why do you call me good?* No one is good but God alone. Which exposes one of the flaws in the rich young ruler's thinking—that this eternal life he is seeking has to do with being good enough to merit it. Jesus won't even call himself good, because that sets up a binary or dualistic look at life—some people are somehow better or more deserving than others—and a judgmental outlook on life. It's as if he's telling the man, from the get-go, this eternal life you are seeking is about unity and not duality. It's about connection and not separation. It's about inclusion and not somehow being better than or apart from.

Then Jesus turns to the commandments, the ones that have to do with how you treat your neighbor. Don't murder, don't steal, don't commit adultery, don't bear false witness, don't defraud (which I assume is related to not coveting or wanting what somebody else has), and honor your father and mother. Those are good commandments. And the man replies, a little like the child in the nursery rhyme who stuck in his thumb and pulled out a plum and said, "What a good boy am I!" all of these I have kept from my youth, Jesus. I aced that course!

That's when the text says something so wonderful for people like me and maybe you to hear. Jesus, looking at him, loved him. Jesus, looking at him, loved him.

Jesus didn't roll his eyes, or otherwise treat him with scorn or contempt, he didn't look down on him as some sort of wealthy person to be sneered at. He looked at him and loved him. Just like Jesus loved his twelve disciples in their fumbling inability to grasp his message, in their jockeying for power and position and their inability to trust in God's provision or to embrace his vulnerability and their own, Jesus loved this rich young ruler. And because he loved him, Jesus extended to this man—this person who was so caught up in achieving and acquiring that he thought eternal life was just one more box he could check and one more thing he could get—Jesus extended to this man a radical invitation.

You lack one thing, he said. If you want to know what eternal life is, sell everything you own and give the money to the poor and come and follow me.

Now, if that doesn't sound like good news to you, you are not alone. The man, hearing it, was shocked and went away grieving—because he had many possessions. What Jesus showed him with

this radical invitation was that eternal life is not something we gain, or achieve, or somehow merit our way into. It is something we give our way into.

Like a lot of Jesus' words of challenge, that sounds a lot better in theory than it does in practice, right? So the man walked away, grieving.

After the man walked away, Jesus looked around at his disciples, "It is hard for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God. It is harder for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a wealthy person to enter God's kingdom."

This is not a favorite text of people in Northern Virginia.

The reason that it is so hard for people with wealth, (and power, and youth, too, by the way—the man is a rich, *young* ruler) to fully embrace God's kingdom is that experiencing it to the degree that we do, is all about **letting go**. It is not about controlling and managing and storing up and protecting and appearing a certain way. The more possessions we have, the more we have to manage and protect. The more we focus on controlling anything beyond ourselves and our own actions and reactions, the more resentments and frustrations we develop. The more we are focused on appearing better than, younger than, smarter than, more attractive than others, the more we get caught up in duality and miss connection. It really is like trying to squeeze a camel through the eye of a needle.

Over the past two thousand years, preachers have been tackling this hard saying of Jesus by either trying to make the camel smaller or to make the needle bigger, in an effort to make the teaching easier to swallow. I don't think that does anyone any favors.

I ran across a video on leadership produced by our denomination that made the case that when the rich young ruler went away grieving, Jesus didn't chase him down and say, "Wait, wait! What if I told you only had to give up 80 percent of your stuff to come and follow me? That's too much? What about 60 percent? How about 50? What will it take to get you to sign on the dotted line? What will it take for you to like me?" No, Jesus, loving him, laid it out there for the man.

The kingdom is not one more thing we possess or achieve, it is not some sort of divine fire insurance, it is the way of self-emptying, vulnerable love which connects us to creation, especially those who are the most at risk, like the poor and the maltreated, but also including those who have wounded us in the past.

Which means that to experience it, we have to learn to *let go*. Let go of our attachment to ego, let go of our inability to hold our wealth and possessions loosely (recognizing that they are gifts from God and an opportunity to bless others), let go of nurturing resentments, or clinging to privilege, or any sense that we are superior to others.

It's no wonder then, because living into the Kingdom involves letting go, that Jesus' disciples asked, "Then who can be saved?"

Barbara Brown Taylor is right: *"The catch is, you have got to be free to receive the gift. You cannot be otherwise engaged. You cannot be tied up right now, or too tied down to respond. You cannot accept God's gift if you have no spare hands to take it with. You cannot make room for it if all your rooms are already full. You cannot follow if you are not free to go..."*

"I know, I know," says Taylor. "The children, the mortgage, the aging parents, the doctor's bills, the economy, the future. I know," she says, "It's the same for me. There are days when threading a camel seems easier than following Jesus. So who can be saved? And who is brave enough to be free? The question has not changed much, but neither has the answer: for us it is impossible, but not for God. For God, all things are possible."

The truth of the matter is that people do "let go" their way into the kingdom all of the time. They do it when they learn to give sacrificially, not just chipping in what is left over at the end of the month, but in ways that require truly letting go of something. They do it when they set aside the long-held grudge or begin to grasp that they really are connected to people that they used to judge as somehow less than or less deserving than they. They do it when they take stands for justice and compassion that might come at a great personal cost. They do it when they look their privilege straight in the eye and recognize it for what it is and begin to understand just a little bit where other people are coming from.

You see, with God, nothing is impossible.

You know one reason I know this? Because I'm a pastor in and to this congregation. We understand that here, when we're at our best.

Of course, we're not always at our best.

I was astounded last night when someone reminded me of what it would mean for us to be at our best.

Last night I was at the FACETS Gala, a fund-raising event marking the 30 year anniversary of FACETS. FACETS is the program through which we host our hypothermia shelter in December. At the FACETS Gala, I heard more about the sorts of things that FACETS does beyond helping enable the hypothermia shelter weeks that various churches host. I heard stories about men and women who have been lifted out of poverty and assisted in their poverty.

Then I had a conversation with a member of Immanuel who said something that I rarely hear. She said—now get this, get this—she said, "Our budget is way too small."

Where does a comment like that come from? "Our church budget is way too small." Think about it. She told me, "If we all gave sacrificially, we could do so much more."

I think that comment came from somebody who has spent a little bit of time with the rich young ruler—and maybe even more time with Jesus.

In his name. Amen.

Taylor, Barbara Brown. "The Preaching Life by Barbara Brown Taylor." Cowley Publications