

21st Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 10.13.24

Hebrews 4:12-16

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account. Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Mark 10:17-31

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?"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 He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth."²¹ 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."²² 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!"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."²⁶ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?"²⁷ 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."²⁹ 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,³⁰ 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.³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." (511)

This man who approached Jesus: he ran up to him. He *ran* up to him, which wasn't an ordinary thing to do. It certainly wasn't an acceptable thing to do. According to one New Testament scholar, for a man to run would involve him holding up his tunic so he wouldn't trip on it, which would involve exposing his ankles and legs. Very unseemly. Not to mention surprising. True, everyone who'd approached Jesus up 'til now did so with some urgency. The thing is, that urgency was actual. A sick daughter. A years-long hemorrhage. This man, though. He seems not to have had much to complain about. Really, his biggest concern seems to have been whether he'd inherit eternal life.

First world problem, we might call that now.

This encounter is told of in all three synoptic gospels, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which isn't so common a thing. Many are the stories that only feature in one, just as many appear in two. But the stories or encounters that appear in all three are few and tend to be significant. Jesus' baptism, or the temptation, or the transfiguration, or the passion and crucifixion and death. And then there's this one—the one of the man who approached Jesus concerned about inheriting eternal life.

It's not usually called this: "eternal life." What the man is most likely referring to: it is everywhere else in the synoptic gospels referred to as the Kingdom of God or the Reign of God or the Kingdom of Heaven. And even here, the man having asked about "eternal life" has Jesus answer in terms of "kingdom of God." Like if you were to ask an Alaskan about Mt. McKinley and the answer came back in its native name, Denali, you'd know there was some communication beneath the communication. Some correction.

And maybe I'm overthinking this, but it seems to me the difference in terms indicates an important difference in attitude about it all. Eternal life amounts to more for the one who gets it, whereas entering the Kingdom of Heaven amounts to being in the presence of God.

No, I don't think it's merely a matter of semantics that this man speaks of wanting to inherit eternal life and not about hoping to enter into the reign of God.

No, I actually think it gets at the core of what's wrong here for this man, this man whom Jesus loved.

The story notes this, and it does nowhere else about any other encounter for Jesus—that Jesus looked at him and loved him. It can't be the case that Jesus loved him and only him. But it is the case that the story makes unique note of it here—and unique indeed because he had the chance to say so to the disciples just moments hence, the disciples whom Jesus looked at.... As if Jesus knew this encounter wouldn't lead to anything, as if he knew that, if he wanted to love this man, now and only now was his chance. As if also to underscore what opportunity this man had that he passed on. Love.

It's easy to think the problem is the man's wealth itself, his many possessions. I suppose we home in on this as the problem because most of us can only be described as having many possessions as well, possessions many of which, most of which, we'd also be loath to unload.

But the problem doesn't seem to be the wealth *per se*, the possessions *per se*, that total poverty is the only way. No, Jesus met plenty of wealthy people in his ministry. He met Pharisees,

he met tax collectors. He's remembered to have said this, counseled total dispossession, to only one of them, to this man. And, of course, there are many encounters he must have had that we have no tell of. Many are the incidents that took place over his ministry that we have no record of. That just stands to reason. He lived for (let's say) thirty years and you can hear told a gospel narrative in a couple of hours. The map isn't the territory, of course—and any map that aims to be is useless as a map.

But even if we did have an utterly thorough record of everything Jesus ever said or did, every encounter he ever had, I doubt this prescription to dispossess oneself of all things would read as universal. It calls to mind a point Karoline Lewis makes in her commentary on the Gospel of John, which we're reading for Book Club, that salvation comes to each person in encounter. It's not blanket phenomenon or a failsafe prescription; it doesn't involve the same steps for every single striver toward salvation. It's unique. It's *personal*. We each need to be saved from something in particular. For each of us, there's some particular stumbling block that stands in the way of our allowing ourselves so simply and utterly to be loved, and to follow in the prepossessing way of love.

For this man, it was his possessing many things that foreclosed on an altogether better possessing, he himself being the one possessed, of the Holy Spirit, of love. And this might be true for others as well, like it might be true for you or someone you know, but it likely isn't true for everyone in possession of many things.

I always notice something about him. He speaks of having *kept* all the commandments. He speaks of wanting to *inherit* eternal life. There's something about him, that his whole orientation in life seems to be about possessing, securing, having and keeping. And it's not a weird locution, to speak of *keeping* the commandments. But you could also speak of honoring them or obeying them or remembering them or living by them or devoting yourself to them or surrendering to them. You have lots of options of how to speak of it, and each one would name how you experience it, this thing that you do on the regular. How we speak of our habits truly names how we engage them. This man *keeps* the commandments, has since his youth.

Just so, you could hope for abiding in the reign of God or becoming a child of the Kingdom of God or entering into the presence of God. But this man wants to inherit eternal life, this likely to become one more of his possessions, one more for this man who seems not simply to have many possessions, but to be possessed by them.

Which he might have been vaguely aware of. Else why would he go with flattery as the mode for engaging Jesus? "Good teacher," he says to him—which, turns out, is a weird locution.

According to one scholar, this phrasing, “Good teacher,” is “very rare in Jewish literature.” *Didaskale agathe*: it’s likely meant as flattery. Indeed, that’s what another scholar citing still other scholars claims. Employing a lofty title for Jesus, this man was likely expecting a lofty title in return, he perhaps even a lofty title. That’s how these things go. It’s a transaction of honorifics.

But Jesus doesn’t transact. He rather loves. So, he turns down the offer of being put aloft: “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone,” which has sent many a theologian into overdrive. Why would Jesus disclaim himself as being good? But I think Jesus was less concerned about making a theological point and more concerned about not becoming involved in a conversational transaction, more concerned indeed not to engage in the oily art of mutual flattery. Flattery, this which Plutarch claimed was an enactment of friendship without actually offering friendship, this which current political theorist, Daniel Kapust, claims is almost an act of aggression, if gentle aggression, depriving the one flattered of one essential benefit of friendship, that “of frank speech.” Jesus, though, wouldn’t do that—wouldn’t feign friendship, certainly not where he loved, and he wouldn’t deprive this man of frank speech. He wouldn’t do that to anyone, I suppose, but not also to this man, and perhaps because he loved him, seeing potential there, seeing promise.

Here, the man given an opportunity. Would he take it?

I have a young friend whose father died when she was a child, declined and died of lung disease in the house where she lived with him and his parents, her grandparents. A smoker, he otherwise qualified for a lung transplant. But he kept failing the tests, kept with his habit of smoking. He died when he was in forties, and his daughter was eight, sitting right beside him.

It’s so hard when someone turns down an opportunity to live.

This obsequious man, this opportunistic man (*running* up to Jesus because now was his chance): he nearly had it. He merely lacked one thing.

One thing!

I imagine the framing of this really piqued this man, this man whose whole mode in life was successfully possessing, and so who might have felt real offence, or at least real pique, in being seen as lacking something, being told he was lacking something, one thing, *one* thing, though not told what that one thing is, which makes it pretty tough to know how to get it.

One thing!

Tougher still that this is what he lacked: the lacking of things, the lack of anything, of all things. What he lacked was a sense of lack, a sense that not everything in the world is for you to

possess. Lacking he was a sense of his own limitations around mastery, around sovereignty. A lack in understanding that for you not anything is possible, for you most things are impossible and therefore you rely on grace.

You will never master time, not even if you strive really hard for eternal life. Time will always be your master, eternal life a fantasy whose truth is rather the reign of God.

You will never master material. You might for a while, possessing even many material things, but eventually these will crack and rot, and you yourself will decay and die.

You will never master others' perception of you or experience of you or judgements about you. You will always be subject to the grand, sinful, beloved web of life, which is of God's making, God alone who is good.

So, the best you can hope for in this age is to be loved, loved in spite of your imprisonment in reality and your participation in sin and your inability to make it all right, truly your cohabitation amidst a reign that is fallen or unfinished or laboring toward perfection and yet is also the workings of God, God who alone is good.

And wealth can obscure all this painful, gracious truth. The having of many things can protect us from the hard-edged, unforgiving, tightly-holding, surprisingly comforting, even reassuring reality of the created order. More specifically, the having of many things can protect us from the disappointing, irritating, comforting, reassuring, essential presence of others, in whose presence is the reign of God.

Like, this:

One trend that maps exactly with a societal increase in wealth is the decrease in multi-generational households. Apparently, the wealthier we get, the less likely we are to live with aging parents as their needs increase or with our adult children as ours do, with extended family by which the labor of life, its many and varied and unceasing tasks, can be divided so better managed. Wealth can untether us from these social ties because we can buy our way out of them (or some of us can). We can hire help. We can hire hands.

And on any given day, this makes life easier. Living in multi-generational households is stressful and irritating; living in long-settled, tightly-holding communities can be oppressive! Living as so-called nuclear families or even single-generational households means kids can be kids and adults can be adults, and aging people can age in peace and quiet. As a trend, though, this becomes a privation. It makes life lonelier for many, perhaps even most. It makes people less happy because we've simply swapped out one stressor for another. There are fewer complicated

relationships to manage and find grating, but there's less slack in a household system for when a kid gets a cold and can't go to school, or something like.

Turns out relationship as transaction only hardly matches love.

Turns out privacy is a sort of privation, even deprivation.

This great prize of the American way of life, privacy, private property: interesting fact, it's classically been understood as akin to deprivation.

I sometimes imagine this self-sufficient man who has *kept* all the commandments and now wants eternal life. I imagine him imagining his life without the privacy and control his wealth has bought him. I imagine him noticing the crowd of people also following Jesus, those whom he's been commanded to join—the disciples and apostles, men and women and even children, noisy, clamorous, bickering, hungry, generous, funny, creative and energizing and smart, alive! I imagine him then giving a thought to what it would be like to join up with this dirty, smelly, strange, witty group, to surrender his privacy and control to this whole nutty thing—discussing, bickering, praying, singing, breaking bread, walking along, bickering some more. I imagine him thinking it through and realizing he can't do it. He simply can't—and then going away shocked, grieving.

Shocked at himself? Shocked at the requirement? Because hell is other people, right?

Ah, no, actually, Jesus seems to say. No, that's the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is other people. Enter at your own risk, if also heavenly reward—now and in the age to come, houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions.

There is a risk here.

Well, living as we do in this wealthy society, having as we do the real option of privacy, unencumbered by people who would just do things slightly differently than we would, maybe one thing the church offers—one *real* thing, to be felt even in this immediate now—is relationship, and not just with people who are like us, and not just with people who *like* us and whom we like, but with anyone within reach of this place, anyone who might come through the church doors whenever they're open and decide for themselves, "Yes, this is my place. I'm bringing myself here."

Turns out we need people to do this to do us, *for* us. If any one of us has any hope of ever entering the kingdom of heaven, where self-sufficiency makes us (ironically) insufficient, where the winning of privacy casts us as at a terrible loss, then we need other people to come along and get on our nerves a little bit. This will make us nervy. This will make us more open to the kingdom which does indeed show up at any given moment to claim us, to possess, to fill our hearts with the nervy move in saying, God saying, "This is my place. I'm bringing myself here."

Turns out, we too might lack one thing—and, lo! Here it is.
Thanks be to God.