

Sermon - Mark 10: 17-31

So today's Gospel comes right after Jesus' teaching about divorce, and blessing the little children, which we heard about last week, and right before Jesus teaches his disciples about whoever must be great among you must first be a servant of all for "Jesus came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." These stories in Mark are tough because they tell us what it really means to be followers of Jesus and it's not about them arriving in Jerusalem enjoying honored star status. Nope, it's about the tough choices they and we must make in this life in order to "inherit eternal life." Now I want you to keep that phrase in the back of your mind - to "inherit eternal life." and we'll come back to it.

The question brought before Jesus was by a man who rushed up to Jesus and fell to his knees asking "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" So Jesus went on to review with the man some of the Commandments - but only the Commandments addressing God's will for us in our human relationships. I find that particularly interesting in the context of writing this sermon. Notice that Jesus does not address the man's relationship with God at all - but only focuses on how the man is called to treat his fellow human beings. The man exclaims "but I've kept those commandments all my life!" I really like the next verse where Mark tells us that Jesus "looked at the man and loved him." I can just imagine that look of kindness, mercy and deep understanding of the limitations of us humans. I can even imagine Jesus shaking his head a bit, leaning in toward the man with his hand on his shoulder and saying, "You do lack one thing. Go and sell everything you own, and give all the proceeds to the poor. Then come and follow me." Oh my goodness how devastated that man must've been - Mark describes him as "shocked" and "grief stricken."

You've probably heard it said that there are numerous passages about what we are expected to give from our wealth, right? In several Old Testament passages the Hebrews are instructed to give 10% of all that they own or grow, and in a number of other places in the New Testament, Paul tells us to give generously, consistently and joyfully. In this passage, however, Jesus instructs the man to give "everything he owns away to the poor." Hmmmmmm, 10% or everything? How many of **us** would have walked away from Jesus and our search for eternal life?

Jesus goes on to tell his disciples that it's nearly impossible for a rich person (which compared to the rest of the world - is ALL OF US!) to enter the dominion of God! Easier for a camel to climb through the eye of a needle! They were all pretty bummed and Peter even said, but "Hey look Jesus - we've done all that - we've given up everything to follow you!" I guess at that point, he was wondering if he and his friends were going to inherit eternal life, after all. A good question seems to me! But Jesus tells them, "Y'all are not going to be disappointed. You will receive a hundredfold of houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields.....and listen to this one - he adds at the very end of that promising sentence the words..."with persecutions." I don't know if they didn't hear what he said, but no one responded to it. Perhaps they were distracted and uplifted by his promise of ETERNAL LIFE in the age to come, and "Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." Maybe they were counting on being first someday!

A couple of things I want to point out about these verses, as tough as they are, they are full of the promises of God to us! When Jesus was asked by his astounded disciples "Then who can be saved?!" Jesus looked at them and said "For mortals? Nothing you can do. It is impossible (to save yourselves)." "But," Jesus went on, "not for God; for God all things are possible."

I read that to mean that there's nothing we individual humans can do to secure our own salvation! I cannot buy my way into heaven - even with the proceeds of last week's lottery winner of \$635 million dollars! I cannot do enough good deeds to pay for my own eternal life! It's not a contractual or mercenary transaction that we make with God to get us into heaven!

Jesus is telling us it is what is in our hearts that makes all the difference. He is telling us that intentions do matter. It is from our Love for Jesus and our gratitude for all the blessings that we have already been given that we respond generously, consistently and joyfully. Everything we have is to be used for responsibly caring for our families, helping to build up our communities, for the lifting up of those who have little or nothing. We are to use our wealth to build up the dominion of God here on Earth! It's not to buy one more expensive car, or piece of jewelry or a larger vacation home or fancy trip to some exotic resort.

What we generously give to others right now, is simply a way to respond to God's great gift of salvation. It's a joy to watch when others who have so little benefit from what we are able to give. Not because Jesus demands it of us but because we love God and want to follow in God's way. It is our RESPONSE to God's loving actions in our lives. The tithe of ten percent seems an honorable goal of giving to me. But many of us are not quite there yet and that's fine! Let me encourage you to consider working toward the Tithe as you think about your future giving. When I think of the ten percent tithe, I always am reminded of the dear old woman in the temple with Jesus and his disciples just off to the side watching her put in her last coin. And I offer a little prayer that she intercedes for me that God will remove all stinginess and jealousy from my thinking and behavior.

So, back to the phrase "what must I do to inherit Eternal Life." That phrase stuck with me as I was reading this passage from Mark. In order to inherit something, someone has to die, right? I was reminded that someone did die for us, and because of his death and resurrection each of us here has already won eternal life. How will you respond to such a gift as that?