

“Imagine the Possibilities”
Text Mark 10: 17-31
Preached October 8, 2006
Reverend Benjamin Broadbent

Morning Scripture:

The lesson today is taken from the Gospel of Mark 10: 17 - 31. It is about the rich young ruler, the rich young man, the rich man.

“As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran and knelt before him and asked him, ‘Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ And 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 witnesses. You shall not defraud. Honor your father and mother.’ And he said to him, ‘Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.’ And 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 and follow me.’ And when he heard this, he was shocked, and he 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 will 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 the rich man 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.’”

Here ends the lesson. May the Lord bless it to our understanding.

Rev. Broadbent:

On the surface, it seemed like a pretty good text to preach on on Stewardship Kick Off Sunday. What I found was, at least to my reading, the primary meaning of the passage is that God does not need you to give your money.

So we go on, nonetheless.

It’s often called the story of the rich young ruler, but we actually don’t know anything about the man’s age, nor do we know anything about whether he’s a ruler of anything. We do know that he is rich, and we know that he is a key. And we know that he comes before Jesus with his wealth and the prestige that follows it, and he says, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

It’s no accident in Mark that this story is placed right after the story of Jesus taking a child, placing the child in the midst of the disciples, and saying, “If

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any of you do not receive the kingdom of God like this child here, you will never get there.” The one with no wealth, with no prestige, with no power becomes the symbol of the one who is ready, now, to receive the kingdom. And now the one with all of the prestige comes in and asks what I think we should take as a genuine question. We may be a little bit jaded by this point in Mark with so many folks coming in and trying to challenge Jesus with their questions, trying to trip him up. I don’t think the young man is trying to do that. I think he is a lot like you and like me. He could be a Protestant Christian in middle America. Basically, he has his needs taken care of. He may not think of himself as rich but by the world’s standard, most certainly is. And yet, despite all of his possessions, something is missing. And there is something in this word and this way of this Rabbi from Nazareth that he wants to get his arms around, that he wants to take in and make real in his own life.

“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus begins, “Why do you call me good. No one is good but God.” He begins by refocusing the man’s question on the one who really matters. You see, Jesus and Mark did not equate himself with being God. A messenger. An expression of. Yes. But not co-equal with. The Jesus of Mark is always pointing people from him to God. “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.”

And he then goes right in and tells the man, “You know the commandments right?” And he names all the commandments. It is very interesting that he leaves out the commandments having to do with how people are supposed to think about or relate to God. For Jesus in this moment, that is beside the question. The important commandments are how do we, as people, relate to each other. And so he names the commandments: “You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal” and so forth.

And the man, not arrogantly, I don’t read it that way, says, “I’ve done all these things.” You can hear his longing. He has all of the things that his culture says are signs of blessed. He has practiced what his tradition has said to practice. He is essentially a good person, but something is missing, and you can hear it when he says, “I’ve done all that. I do all that, everyday.” And to him Jesus says, “You lack one thing then. Go and 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.

I think some of us sometimes feel that same grief. That while we feel like we have the basic things that keep us going, that keep us comfortable, that keep us healthy, that keep us connected, we are not willing to make that leap that we think would really shake things up, would really change things. Have you ever found yourself thinking, “You know if only I could just move in the direction of my passion, go there, then things would really shake up. And

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maybe then I would sense the presence of God, just burning alive within me.” And then you don’t do it.

Yeah, I could say in this sermon, “You know, everyone of us needs to follow exactly what Jesus says here, to the letter. So between now and next week, I want you to sell all your things. I expect you to come back, and all you are going to have is some kind of a simple tunic on. That is going to be the only clothing you wear. You are going to get rid of all your investments. You are going to liquidate your accounts. You are going to give it to the poor, and you’ll come back next Sunday, and then we’ll say a blessing on the church, because, of course, we will need to sell this off to give it to the poor, and we’ll need to ...”

Not one of you would do that if I said that. Let’s be clear on that. I wouldn’t do that if I said that. So what possible sense can we make of this text, without twisting what Jesus has said into something of our own rationalization, something to fit within our own place of comfort and justification that it’s okay that I have the things that I have that make me comfortable. What possible sense?

I heard this following story in a sermon this summer. It was actually preached by my wife, Brooke’s mom’s partner, Nancy, who is the Associate Minister at Primo Congo Sanyo, First Congregational Church, San Jose. As soon as I heard it, I said, “Stewardship Sunday.” Lynn Twist, former director of the Hunger Project, a global organization dedicated to ending world hunger, writes about her experiences as a fundraiser for her agency and what she learned about abundance and generosity in her own life. She wrote in her book, which is called The Soul of Money, “Eventually we came to know ourselves, not for what we had or owned, not for what we accumulated, but for what we allocated.”

In her book, she tells about being invited to two meetings on the same day. The first meeting was with the CEO of a major food company who wanted to give a sizeable contribution to the Hunger Project. You see, the company had recently suffered some public relations setbacks, and the company leaders felt that making a donation might help clean up its image. Does this sound familiar?

She was ushered into the CEO’s office and briefly told him about the mission and the work of her organization and the challenges of ending world hunger. When she was done, he opened his desk drawer and pulled out a preprinted check for \$50,000. She felt the presentation was merely perfunctory, and the tone of his voice told her that he had no genuine interest in her work, or in making any kind of a difference in the work to end world hunger. He just wanted to offload his guilt and shame from public mistakes the company had made, and he wanted to look good in the media. She said she felt the guilt of the company coming right across the desk and into her hands with that check.

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She put it in her briefcase, thanked him, and headed off for her second meeting, in the heart of New York – Harlem. Seventy-five people of color from a low income neighborhood gathered in an old church building for a fundraiser. She spoke to the group about the Hunger Project and its commitment, in particular, to Africa. When it came time to ask for donations, she almost didn't want to, knowing that these were obviously very poor people themselves.

Well, an older woman stood up and said, "Girl, I like what you've said. I ain't got no checkbook, and I ain't got no credit cards. To me, money is a lot like water. For some folks, it rushes through their life like a raging river. For me, money comes through my life like a little trickle, but I still want to pass it on, in a way that does the most good for the most folks. I see that as my right and as my responsibility. It's also my joy. I have \$50 in my purse that I want to give to you. She walked up the aisle and handed to Lynn the \$50, all in five, ten, and one dollar bills. Then she gave Lynn a big hug.

As she headed back to her seat, other people started coming up and giving her money. Lynn wept as they came forward, because she could see this outpouring was truly from the heart. She wrote that the amount of money, \$500 at most, was more precious than the \$50,000 she had received that morning. And, ultimately, she felt it would do more to end world hunger. It could do more because it carried the energy of their commitment to make a difference. So the next day, get this, Lynn mailed the \$50,000 check back to the food company's CEO and was relieved to feel that she was returning the guilt and shame along with it.

That woman in Harlem had it right – that our resources are like water. There is a flow about them. Sometimes like a rushing river and sometimes like a trickle. Living in the flow, regardless of how much is in our bank account, is all about generosity. You see, generosity is not only the hallmark of God's presence and power; it is also the hallmark of God's children.

Well after that rich man walked away, despondent and crushed, Jesus turned to his disciples, and he said, "It is so hard to get into the kingdom. It is especially hard for a rich person to get into the kingdom of God. It would be like fitting a camel through the eye of the needle." You've heard it. Of course, it's a hyperbole to say, "There's no way." And his disciples were astounded by that. Now why? Because in their culture, as in our culture, we believe, whether we admit it or not, that riches are a sign that God has blessed us.

You've thought it yourself. You've thought it about others. "Man, he must have done something right." "Boy, things are really starting to work for me. I must really have God's blessing." It was the same attitude at the time of Jesus. So that the rich were actually the benefactors of the temple. The only reason why

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anybody could gather is because the rich, the blessed, would bestow their benevolence upon the people by maintaining the temple worship.

Jesus is saying the rich, the most privileged, the ones that you all think are the most blessed, it's impossible for them. What? And so their question, "Who then can be saved?" And his response, "For mortals, it is impossible. But for God, all things are possible." You see, he is putting the emphasis back on God. God does not need you to give your money. God loves you already, more than you imagine, more than you think you deserve.

I love this detail of this story. This is the only place in the whole Gospel of Mark where Jesus loved someone. The failure, the guy who is supposed to have it altogether and, ultimately, falls down. The one who walks away despondent, "I can't do it. I can't. I can't do it." He's the one that Jesus loves.

That's you. You can't do it. You couldn't do it. I can't do it. I can't give the way that I'm asked. I can't return the generosity that God has given to me. And yet God looks love upon you and upon me. It turns this whole stewardship thing up on its head, which is exactly why the Stewardship committee chose the words that we chose to put on our posters and brochure. The words that don't fit with our financial sense in our culture. This is not a measured welcome that we give. It's a prodigal welcome. It's wasteful. We're so welcomed. That's who we are growing into, who we are praying to be, is to provide a prodigal welcome.

We are not investing ourselves in a wonder that comes by predictable steps. We are making ourselves totally vulnerable to be blown away by an unexpected wonder and awe at who God is and who God is moving to be through our church.

We are not playing it safe. We are making a risky witness to ourselves and to the culture around us. We are purposely placing ourselves in uncomfortable places, making a risky witness on behalf of the least among us. We are imagining the possibilities, made possibly not through our giving but through God's love. Imagine what's possible, when we can receive and understand that love.

Now, there's a postscript to the story about Lynn. Years later she received a letter from the CEO, who had since retired after having received a very lucrative severance package. He told her the interaction between them years earlier would have been forgotten, except for the return of the \$50,000. As you can imagine, it stood out for him as a seminal moment. And all these years later, he realized that he did, in fact, want to make a difference in ending world hunger. From his own pocket, he made a personal contribution to the project, many times larger than the original check. He did it this time from his

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soul, an act of true generosity and the fulfillment of something that had been left undone.

“For mortals, it is impossible, but for God, all things are possible.”

Amen.