

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

Psalm 22:1-15

Hebrews 4:12-16

Mark 10:17-31

What's wrong with being rich? There are plenty of people in the Bible who were rich and they found God's favor. Abraham, for example, was an incredibly rich man for his day and, yet, God chose him to be the father of the nation of Israel. By a strange set of circumstances, Moses was raised in the Pharaoh's palace in the lap of luxury. King David was a shepherd boy that God lifted up to be the most powerful and influential of the Jewish kings. Why does Jesus tell us today that it is easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven? It would seem that Jesus is telling us that we can't have it both ways...we can't be rich and also enter into the kingdom of heaven. What is Jesus trying to explain to us?

The gospel lesson this morning begins by telling us that a man ran up to Jesus and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" There's a flaw even in the question itself. What must I do? We've already learned that entrance into the kingdom of heaven is not something we earn by what we do. It is a gift given to us by God through what Jesus did...not anything that we do. We've been told over and over again that we can't earn our way into heaven. Jesus gives us a clue about what's on his mind in his answer: "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." In other words, on our own, none of us will ever be 'good enough' to enter into the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus reminds this man about the commandments. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. You shall not covet anything or anyone that belongs to your neighbor. You shall honor your mother and father. These are the six commandments in the ten commandments that speak to our relationships with each other. Jesus doesn't speak here about the commandments that have to do with our relationship with God: You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourselves any graven image and worship it. You shall not use the name of the Lord wrongfully or misuse it. Keep the Sabbath Day holy to honor God.

But the man protests that he has kept all these laws. So what else must he do? Remember, Jesus can see into the heart of each of us. He knows this man's heart. He knows what is most important to this man. And he knows that it isn't God. Even though he has kept all the laws of good behavior with others, Jesus knows that this man's wealth is getting in the way of his

relationship with God. His heart is with his 'stuff' and his bank account, not with God, even though by all measures he is respectful of God.

One of the things that we tend to lose sight of is that the law was not established simply to regulate our behavior with others although it does provide some excellent guidelines for keeping relationships among human beings orderly. It was not given to us as merely a code for civil conduct. It was given to us to put us on notice...to accuse us...to hold us accountable. Both Jesus and Paul tell us that the law is provided to us so that we will be aware of the difference between right and wrong. It was given to us primarily to change us internally rather than just to keep peace among neighbors. It's about knowing where the mark is ...and instilling guilt in us when we've missed the mark. The laws are there to show us how we are supposed to be and to encourage us...charge us even...to alter our internal thoughts and feelings and impulses...in short, to alter our hearts in response to the law.

We can do a pretty good job most of the time keeping the letter of the law, but just to impress upon us how difficult it is to be truly righteous...to be truly in right relationship with God...Jesus ramped up the expectations. Jesus told us that it's not enough not to commit murder. If we have anger in our hearts toward another person, it is tantamount to murder. Well, what human being can avoid completely ever being angry with another person? And Jesus told us that it's not enough not to commit adultery. If we look lustfully or daydream or fantasize about a person who is not our spouse, we have committed adultery in our hearts. That's pretty hard for any of us to avoid. And it's not enough not to bear false witness against our neighbor. If we repeat a rumor about someone or gossip about them, we have borne false witness. One of the two great commandments is that we love our neighbors as ourselves. But Jesus upped the ante when he told us that we should also love our enemies and the people who wish to do us harm. Jesus ramped up the requirements for keeping the commandments in order to impress upon us the impossibility of always keeping all of them...as we are mere mortals. We are human beings filled with flaws and self-deception. We cannot possibly be 'good enough' to enter into the kingdom of heaven if it is up to us alone.

Jesus reminds the questioning man that only God is good. As if to underscore the futility of trying to be good enough on our own to enter into heaven's gates, the law is there to drive us into the arms of Jesus who did for us what we cannot do for ourselves. We cannot earn our way into heaven. We cannot be good enough to enter into heaven on our own. We desperately need the bridge to heaven that is Jesus Christ himself.

Jesus looked at the man and he loved him. Jesus knew what was standing in the man's way...what was preventing him from allowing the law to change him...what was standing in the way between him and Almighty God. Jesus told him to get rid of the obstacle. Get rid of what was standing between him and God. Sell all his 'stuff' and give the money to the poor and

follow Jesus. This is the only instance in any of the gospels when Jesus asks someone to be his disciple and is refused. And the man himself is sad about his decision. On some level he seems to be aware that following Jesus is the answer to his original question, but he's not willing to do that and he walks away grieving.

The wealth we have as citizens of a first world country is a great temptress. It's easy for us to deceive ourselves that our 'stuff' just isn't that important to us or that the size of our bank account or portfolio or 401K is not uppermost in our minds. It's not that the stuff or the money are bad in and of themselves. What's bad is what these things do to us. We tend to drift into thinking that we alone are responsible for our success and our wealth. That we've done it on our own. That we are dependent and beholden to no one...most especially not to God... when the exact opposite is the truth. It is the law and our inability to keep both the spirit and the law that brings us up short and strips us of our feelings of self-righteousness.

Unless we are aware of our utter dependence on God, it is hard for us to embrace the kingdom of heaven. Unless we have the blind faith of a little child, we will not see the kingdom of God. If we think we are doing all of this on our own and that the kingdom of God is our reward for good behavior, we have missed the point. Unless we allow the law to hold us accountable in every respect, our own souls do not change. Unless we gratefully embrace the gift of eternal life that Jesus has given us, we won't see the kingdom of God.

We need both the law and the gospel to enter into eternal life. The law and the sense of guilt and regret that it produces in us by showing us how far we fall from the mark pushes us toward the gospel and the fact that Jesus did for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Jesus provided us with the gateway to eternal life. He is the bridge between us and God. All we need to do is set aside our earthly cares and follow him. We need to willingly acknowledge our dependence on God and throw ourselves on the mercy of Jesus Christ.

Jesus spoke the good news for us himself when he said: "For mortals, it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.