“Ask Another Question”

March 1, 2020 (First Lent)

St. Paul’s UCC Church

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**Mark 10:17-27**

As Jesus 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.”

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I never really know how to acknowledge, or how to mark, the season of Lent. Growing up, my Catholic friends told me Lent was all about giving something up: that’s how you knew it was Lent – you weren’t eating sugar, or drinking coffee, or watching as much TV. And even though I never gave up much for Lent myself, I think my friends were onto something. Lent is a sober season, and a sobering one. It’s a season to reflect honestly on where we are with God, with ourselves, and with the rest of the world. And maybe when my friends were giving up their various things, maybe they were more in tune with the all of that – with God, with themselves and the rest of the world. Maybe they were more in tune with prayer, with listening for God *in* themselves and the world. And maybe that’s what Lent really *is* about: listening to God, especially when the world feels a little off, when is not quite the same as it is other times of the year.

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In our story for today, from Mark chapter 10, a rich man comes up to Jesus and wants to know: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus says to him, “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.” Now the rich man is also a good man. He’s done all that, and then some: “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” And Jesus looks at him, and loves him, and says, “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.” Well, this shocks the rich man. It makes him sad, too. So he goes away grieving, because he has a lot of stuff.

I’m with the rich man here. I, too, have followed the law. I haven’t murdered anyone or committed adultery. I’ve never born false witness in court, or defrauded anyone. I’ve tried to honor my parents. As for the stealing, one time, when I was five, I stole a piece of bubble gum from a supermarket. But I felt so guilty about it that by the time my mom and I got to the parking lot, I was crying so hard that Mom quickly figured out what had happened and told me, gently, that it was okay; there was still time to return the gum. So I’m not even sure that counts as stealing. On the whole, I’ve led a pretty good life, just like the rich man in Mark’s gospel.

But then we get this really crazy part of the story, where Jesus hears what the man has done; and loving him, tells him he lacks one thing: he needs to go and sell everything he has and give it to the poor. The man is shocked; and so am I. What did you say, Jesus? Are you sure? Do you really think I would be a better person if I sold everything I owned and became homeless, someone who couldn’t support herself? Does that even really make sense?

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Jesus goes on to teach the disciples about this whole thing, telling them that it’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.

When I was in Sunday School, I remember how my teachers interpreted this story. They said that the Eye of the Needle was really just some gate in the wall surrounding Jerusalem*,* and that the camel actually *could* get through it, it just needed to get down on its knees to do so; the camel just needed to stoop down. In other words, I was told that it *was* possible for the man to enter the gate of heaven; he just had to be humble about it.

I have since learned that that is just not true. The story of the gate and the camel kneeling was apparently invented by some medieval preacher,[[1]](#footnote-1) and I guess my Sunday School teachers got wind of it. Bless their hearts.

I think what’s going on here is that Jesus is being kind of playful. He’s being hyperbolic: he’s exaggerating to get his point across. What do you have to do to be saved? Jesus thinks of something that he knows is impossible for the rich man, and he says it, to prove a point. What do you have to do to be saved? Nothing. You can’t do anything. It would like… trying to get a camel into a needle. It ain’t gonna happen.

*What must I do to inherit eternal life?* That’s the question the man asks; and the answer is, nothing. Or, as Jesus puts it, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” In other words, salvation is none of my business; it’s *God’s* business. Salvation is God’s doing, God’s gift. And *I* can’t change it. I can’t give the gift back. God has already saved this man, and God has already saved me, and God has already saved you.

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The man asks the wrong question here. He needs to ask another question. He wants to know about salvation, but it’s already happened. Instead, the question should be something like, “*Because* we are saved, what do we do about it?” What does a saved life look like? How do we live out our salvation?

I’m not entirely sure, but I suspect that my Catholic friends growing up were right! It *does* have to do with giving something up.

It’s true that I don’t believe Jesus asks us to give up everything we own in a crazy, exaggerated way. But I do think that as saved people, we want to make room for Jesus in our lives. As saved people, that’s our most natural state: to make room for God, to be full of God. But none of us gets this quite right, at least not on this side of things. All of us could stand to improve.

As people who are already saved by grace, we still live broken lives; and stuff gets in the way of what God wants for us. Maybe it *is* money, like with the man today. Maybe it’s just good old-fashioned anxiety that gets in the way of our living the gift God has already given us.

Maybe it’s security. Maybe it’s the status quo, doing things the same way, knowing what to expect.

It’s a small gesture, but that is one of the reasons we are giving up bulletins for Lent. This small gesture gets us out of our comfort zones, just a little bit. It disorients us just enough to maybe hear God speaking to us in a new way. Or maybe we’ll hear something we’ve never quite heard before. Who knows? I’m so excited to listen together.

*What gets in the way of God?* That’s the question. We are already saved; and God wants to fill us up and make us fully alive, but what is blocking that? *That’s* the question the man from today should’ve asked. And *that’s* the question we get to live with during the season of Lent.

Thanks be to God.

1. See Podcast “NL212:First Last and Last First,” found on WorkingPreacher.Org. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)