

On the Way to What? (Mark 10:17-31)

I owe you an apology. You'd think after preaching for 30 years I'd have figured it out by now.

I try. I really do. I don't **want** this kind of stuff to happen. But I'm weak. I should be better, but alas ... I'm an imperfect man. And you bear the consequences of my inadequacies.

It pains me to say it, but you could probably go to another church and find a minister without my failings. But here, at DBCC, you're stuck with a pastor who—try as he might—can't protect you from Jesus.

Jesus insists on saying things I can't figure out a way to un-say. If I'm not here to make the gospel a little more palatable for everyday people, if I can't help Jesus say things in a softer, more user-friendly way, then what am I good for? A really skilled

preacher could make Jesus say something different from “Go, sell what you have, and give the money to the poor.”

A really practiced preacher could sand off the sharp edges from a passage like our Gospel for this morning. Something like: “Well, we all know that Jesus didn’t **actually** mean for the man to sell everything and give the money to the poor. He meant for the man to tackle the one thing that was getting in the way of his personal relationship with God. It didn’t have to be money; it could have been too many bratwursts. So, the whole ‘camel through the eye of a needle-thing’ was meant only for him. You may safely disregard Jesus’ exhortation about selling all you have.”

A deft preacher could make this passage dance in ways I can’t seem to manage. Something like: “The problem Jesus is addressing is that the man is too proud. He only **thinks** he’s kept all the commandments since his youth. His arrogance is what’s keeping him from God—the whole ‘money-thing’ is just a tactic

Jesus uses—a kind of rhetorical punch in the nose—to wake the man up from his hubris.”

But, see, I’m not smart enough to get Jesus to say the kinds of things that would make this passage easier to hear. So, I apologize in advance and ask your forgiveness. You deserve better.

A decade’s worth of graduate school and seminary training, and all I can manage to come up with is that Jesus pretty much meant what he said.

But even though I’m just not that good at this preaching stuff, I guess I probably ought to take a shot at it anyway.

Our passage opens with what appears to be some rather hum-drum scene setting: “As [Jesus] was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him.”

See what I mean? Nothing particularly earth-shattering here. So, Jesus is on a journey. So what?

But saying Jesus is on a journey doesn't quite get to the important part of what's actually happening. In Greek, the reading would be something more like "As [Jesus] was heading out ***on the way.***"

Given that translation, what's the obvious question a studious reader should ask?

"On the way ... to where?"

Well, if you've been following Mark's narrative for the past several Sundays, Jesus has just recently predicted his coming execution at the hands of the Romans, which happened in the 8th chapter of Mark as Jesus and his disciples were "on the way." Then Jesus and the boys go up a high mountain, where Jesus is transfigured. Afterward, in the 9th chapter, Jesus does some more walking and

teaching, when he asked the disciples, "What were you arguing about on the way?"

Then we get to today's passage, which begins once again with that phrase, telling us that Jesus is on the way?

But "on the way" to where?

Jerusalem.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus hasn't been to Jerusalem before. But he's headed there now.

Okay, fine, but what happens in Jerusalem?

The authorities grab him, try him, whip him, and ultimately crucify him. All the stuff he predicted "on the way" would happen ... will soon happen.

So, perhaps the question the opening of our passage raises isn't "On the way to where?" but "On the way to what?"

The answer to that, of course, is: On the way to a confrontation with the system of domination that ruled the lives of those who lived in Palestine—both the Temple system and the Roman Imperialism that controlled the Temple authorities.

And Mark ties this fatal travelogue together with that short phrase: "On the way."

So, when Mark begins this story of the rich man asking what he must do to inherit eternal life with the phrase, "On the way," we know he's setting the whole drama of the rich man's desire for inherited eternal life against the backdrop of Jesus' soon-to-be forfeited earthly life—a life, by the way, forfeited not so much by Jesus, but by the politicians who felt threatened by him.

Seen from **this** vantage point, the rich man's decision not to do as Jesus says and **sell** everything he has in pursuit of the ultimate good stands in stark contrast to the picture of Jesus, who is on the way to having everything **stolen** from him—his dignity, his friends, and, ultimately, his life. In the Humanities, that's what we call irony.

Hearing that he must sell everything and give the money to the poor apparently strikes the rich man as an unreasonable thing for Jesus to ask, and so he walks away. And in our pastoral haste to reassure everyone that Jesus couldn't possibly mean that the rich man had to sell **everything** and give the money to the poor—or at least that if he **did** mean that, he certainly didn't mean that **everyone** has to sell everything, because that would be ridiculous—we preachers too often fail to take seriously the possibility that Jesus actually meant what he said ... literally.

(See, for some people, taking the Bible literally is the only way to read the Bible ... until it comes to something as difficult as selling

everything you own and giving it to the poor. It would seem that in cases where reading the Bible literally might **literally** cost people something, it's perfectly acceptable to read the Bible **figuratively**.)

And in an attempt to drive the point further home, Jesus offers the now well-known adage: "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."

The disciples hear Jesus make this last claim about the difficulty of the wealthy entering the kingdom of God, and they're thrown for a loop. They start mumbling to each other: "Well ... then who **can** be saved?"

Doesn't that strike you as an odd thing for a bunch of working class fishermen and garden variety peasants to be worried about? I mean, more than likely, none of them have two nickels to rub

together, which means that they are **definitely** not the rich folks Jesus is talking about. So, why are they so concerned?

The conventional wisdom of Jesus' day was that wealth was a sign of God's favor. In short, the more you had, the more God was pleased with you. So, if rich people—the blessed class—would find it exceedingly difficult to enter the kingdom of God, the question was obvious: "Then who **can** be saved?"

You can see how they come to that conclusion, right? If not rich people who bear the mark of God's blessing, then who?

I think the confusion we feel about the disciples' response stems from a traditional belief that in speaking of the kingdom of God, Jesus is somehow speaking of heaven. If that's the interpretive frame for this passage—that is, rich people can't get into heaven—then I understand how problematic this passage must be. But when Jesus talks about the kingdom of God, he's not using it as just another name for the "sweet bye and bye." For

Jesus “eternal life” doesn’t begin after you die; it begins right now.

No. When Jesus breaks out “the kingdom of God,” he’s mixing politics and religion just by using those words. He’s talking about a new world that’s arranged as though God were in charge, and not the kinds of people who normally find themselves in the seats of power—which is to say, the kinds of people who will very soon put Jesus to death.

So, when Jesus talks about “rich people” and “camels” and the “eye of the needle,” he’s not talking about who’s eligible for a smart new McMansion with an in-ground pool in the hereafter; he’s talking about the kind of world God imagines—in which our personal piety always takes a back seat to how we treat the poor and the powerless.

He’s talking about a new reign in which the world everybody takes for granted as always favoring the “haves” will be turned on

its head. And in this new world, what's important to God is not how many gold stars you can stick on the Ten Commandments chart you keep on the refrigerator, or how much wealth and power you've managed to accumulate, but how much you're willing to give away so that the "have **nots**" can finally "have **some**."

Or, as Jesus puts in the last verse of our passage: "But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

In other words, Jesus once again takes the opportunity to paint a picture of a world where the way things are, is not the way things **will** be.

At present, it's just assumed that the rich and the powerful are the people upon whom God smiles. But in the reign of God, the rich and the powerful sacrifice what they have to make sure **everyone** has enough.

As it stands now in this world, the people who write the rules get to tell women whether or not they've been assaulted; they get to tell Black people whether or not they should have been shot; they get to tell immigrants seeking asylum whether or not the threats of death and violence from which they're escaping are real; they get to tell LGBTQ people whether or not they can keep their jobs, their homes, and their dignity; and they get to tell people with preexisting conditions whether or not they can buy health insurance.

The world in which we live is set up to give every advantage to those with wealth and power: they get to decide—if the Pandora Papers are any indication—whether or not they pay taxes, and just how much they're willing to let go of.

But Jesus announces a new world where all of what we've taken for granted is turned upside down: The last will be first and the first will be last: the poor will have enough; the disenfranchised will have the power to participate in the community; the

oppressed will be set free; those who've been beaten down will be lifted up; those who've been forgotten will be remembered; and those who've lived on the outside will occupy the center.

On the way to his execution, Jesus runs into a man satisfied with the way the world is and with his place in it. Jesus tells him that **that** world is coming to an end, and that the rich man needs to prepare himself for a **new** world in which the rules of the current world that privilege wealth and power no longer apply. The rich man can't wrap his head around this kingdom of God Jesus proclaims, and he's shocked and goes away grieving—because such a world makes no sense to him.

But Jesus' words aren't meant to grieve the man. His words aren't intended to set up barriers to entry into the kingdom of God. Jesus is trying to help the man adjust to a world where the rules no longer favor people like him.

The grace in this story, as Jesus explains, is that “for mortals it is impossible” to make all the adjustments necessary, “But not for God; for God all things are possible.”

As C.S. Lewis once said, “For God all things are possible—even fitting a camel through the eye of a needle. Of course, it’s pretty hard on the camel.”

What Jesus does here is not only to ask the young man to give up his dependence on his stuff, but to give the money to the poor—that is, to reorient his life in a way that reveals his dependence on everyone else.

Do you see?

In the young man’s search to inherit eternal life, Jesus shows him that he needs the poor just as much as they need him. So, when the young man walks away dejected, it’s not only because he can’t bear to part with his stuff. Part of what drives him away is

the thought of letting go of a system in which he has few needs, in favor of a system in which the powerless are on equal footing, a system in which the rich looking to inherit eternal life need the poor ... as much as the poor looking for an equitable community where everyone has enough need the rich.

But it's so hard, Jesus. I **like** my life the way it is. Isn't there an easier way?

Father Zossima, in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* comments, "Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing, compared with love in dreams." Which is to say, I suppose—it's a lot easier to talk about this passage than it is to actually have to live it.

But then again, we shouldn't be surprised by this kind of talk from the man who eventually gave away everything he had, so that all of us—the rich and the poor, the young and the old, the immigrant and the citizen, the folks at the front of the line and the folks at the back of the line—could live together in a

community where everyone has precisely what they need not only to survive, but to thrive.

According to this passage, if we're seeking eternal life not only do we need less stuff, we need more of each other.

Amen.