

We Can't Save Ourselves; Mark 10:17-31

Second Presbyterian Church

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Today's scripture passage occurs as Jesus is beginning yet another journey. Suddenly, a man comes up to Jesus and interrupts him. The man stops Jesus, kneels before him, and asks Jesus a question that his disciples might have been afraid to ask and we probably wonder as well. Listen for what God's Spirit is saying to us as I read from Mark, chapter 10, verses 17-31.

Scripture:

17 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?' ¹⁸Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You 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." ' ²⁰The man said to Jesus, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' ²¹Jesus, 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.' ²²When the man heard Jesus say this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

23 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!' ²⁴And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It 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.' ²⁶They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' ²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'

28 Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.' ²⁹Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, ³⁰who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. ³¹But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'

Sermon:

Nathan West's background is in the insurance industry, and he understands mass casualties. When more than 14 inches of rain fell on his community the weekend of Sept 28th, Nathan knew the loss people were going to feel and what people were going to need.¹ "...after [Nathan] surveyed the damage to his family's home...[he used his] limited available mobile phone service to look for help outside the region."² His own anxiety for others fueled his response. "I knew we needed to do something, and quickly."³

In the same way, members of Black Mountain Presbyterian Church watched as their community's streets became rivers of running muddy water caused by Hurricane Helene that weekend. As help began to arrive, Katie Duvall, a staff member at the church, said, "It all started from a post on the church's Facebook page that got shared a bunch of times. Things really got moving from there..."⁴

One could say things took off. "Within 48 hours we had 500 cases of water or more..."⁵ said Nathan. Black Mountain Presbyterian became the repository and distribution center for that water and all the other supplies which began flowing into Black Mountain that next week. A few days later people came for a hot lunch served in the church parking lot between 11-1 and to pick up needed supplies. As the days went by, a few people turned into thousands from around the region. Church members and non-members work side by side to serve the community they love and distribute items to those who show up. No one is turned away.⁶

"It's so nice to get a cup of Dynamite coffee,' one woman said... Dynamite Roasting Co. is one of several...businesses offering goods and services to area residents impacted by...Helene."⁷

"Goods and services" took me right to our passage today which involves a rich man who asks Jesus a simple but always complex question, *Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?* (v.17) Jesus responds, *Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.* (v 18) Perhaps the man is confusing good with goods? Like goods and services? A transactional relationship perhaps?

¹ Anonymous, "Black Mountain Presbyterian Shines Bright in the Darkness," 10/9/24, from The Valley Echo from The Presbyterian Outlook web magazine, <https://pres-outlook.org/2024/10/black-mountain-presbyterian-shines-bright-in-the-darkness/> accessed 10/11/24.

² Anonymous, "Black Mountain Presbyterian Shines Bright in the Darkness," 10/9/24, from The Valley Echo from The Presbyterian Outlook web magazine, <https://pres-outlook.org/2024/10/black-mountain-presbyterian-shines-bright-in-the-darkness/> accessed 10/11/24.

³ Anonymous.

⁴ Anonymous.

⁵ Anonymous.

⁶ Anonymous.

⁷ Anonymous.

You know the commandments, Jesus says: ‘*Do not murder; Do not commit adultery; do not steal; do not bear false witness; Do not defraud...*’” (vs 18-19). Do not defraud. That’s not in the list of ten commandments that I know. Perhaps this man needed his own personal commandment? He is rich after all. *Do not defraud*.

Teacher, he says, *I have kept all these since my youth*. (v 20). Really? All of them; all of the time? Perhaps he is delusional.

Then you lack one thing, says Jesus. *Go, sell what you own, give the money to the poor, for you will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me*. (v 21). Jesus never answers the man’s question about how to have eternal life. He tells the man how he can have treasure in heaven.

When the rich man heard [Jesus’ answer], he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. (v 22) Many goods. Jesus did not answer his transactional question.

The rich man does not seem prepared for the answer he receives. He is shocked (v 22), the text tells us; or, maybe “The man doesn’t understand what he wants. [Maybe] he is lost.”⁸

Could we be lost like this rich man as well?

The disaster and catastrophic destruction caused by Hurricane Helene, has reminded me in a very humbling way, that no matter how much I save, or prepare, or plan, or insure our family, one day everything I have could be washed away. After all, who ever thought that a hurricane could so drastically affect the mountains of Tennessee and North Carolina? One day a home was there; the next day that same home is floating down the river. Not one of us can pile up enough money to prepare for the worst that came that day. In some ways we are holding on to our money with a tight fist, hoping we will be able to save ourselves from a catastrophe. Trying to ensure we will have enough.

This time of the year is our season of stewardship in the church. It’s when we talk about money. Sometimes the only time we talk about money. No preacher wants to talk about money. As pastors, we’d much rather talk about hell and damnation than money. But the time has come.

You’re going to learn soon that Second’s expected budget for next year is over \$1M. In fact, we project our expenses to be larger than in any of the other two years I’ve been serving you here. Why? We’ve increased staff and hope to increase staff more; we’ve doubled the amount for our cleaning service, and our building costs more and more each year, just to name a few.

⁸ Scott Bader-Saye, “Mark 10:17-22—Theological Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Gospels—Mark: A Feasting on the Word Commentary, Vol 1*, eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), Kindle edition.

The truth about our stewardship campaign is that this congregation has the money we need. There is plenty of money right here, we just have to let go of it. Like the rich man, we must decide how much we want to follow Jesus and how much we want to hold on to our goods. Each of us has to decide how much we value our relationship with Jesus, with our community, and with one another.

I want to change the question we might ask ourselves. Instead of asking “Do I have enough money?”, I want you to ask, “how much do the relationships and love that I get from this church mean to me and how can I give back to God.” Maybe that question will lead us to ask another hard question “what am I spending my money on and is it lifegiving to me?”

“Jesus invites [the rich man] into [the lifegiving relationship of] love...”⁹ Because Jesus already loves the rich man; *Jesus, looking at the rich man, and loved him* (v 21), the text tells us. Jesus doesn’t command his love in return; he invites the rich man to love by giving.

In the same way, Jesus already loves us. Our giving is a response to that incredible love. Jesus invites us to respond to his love with love for our brothers and sisters and our church.

The hard truth is that Jesus lets us know that our wealth can get in the way of our discipleship. Remember the camel and the eye of a needle? We are often afraid that we will not have enough if hard times come. The truth is, we can never have enough money. We cannot save ourselves. Only God can save us.

When the flood came to Western North Carolina, no one was prepared, but the supplies needed showed up by the grace of God. Nathan, and others like him, left behind their own concerns and needs to help neighbors. Others used their money to supply the “goods and services” that their fellow neighbors needed. All the fear of having enough money suddenly became secondary to helping those in need. These are the sacrifices that people made to care for others. These are the sacrifices God invites us to make for our church and for our community to make our world a better place to help others in need.

What must I do to inherit life? Jesus invites us to give away that which gives life to others and to receive life by following him, unencumbered by all that holds us down and holds us back. The revised question to ask: How much do the relationships and love that I get from this church mean to me and how can I give back to God?

⁹ Anonymous.

