

Trust and Generosity

Mark 10:17–31

We continue our walk through Mark. This week's and last week's scripture could be put under the hard sayings of Jesus. In Mark, Jesus has been teaching his disciples about what it means to follow him: being a "servant of all," receiving the kingdom of God like a child, viewing cultural institutions (like marriage, divorce, and economic resources) through the lens of serving the most vulnerable.

The phrase in Mark 10:21, "sell what you own, and give the money to the poor," makes us uncomfortable and makes us want to understand what Jesus means. This passage has been interpreted in many creative ways throughout Christian history. Monastics point to it as the basis for a monk's vow to poverty. Others insist Jesus only meant his advice to apply to the rich man himself, or only to the very rich, or only to a special inner circle of followers. Still others argue that Jesus' real concern here is "attachment" to wealth, not the possession of it; or that the story is meant to underline that salvation comes not from human feats of piety but from God's grace alone. Each of these options has some value in understanding the text. Yet each fails to do full justice to the story. The passage challenges us, disturbs us—and it's the only episode in which Jesus calls someone to follow him and gets turned down.

There is a lot to notice about what the man says and does. He says "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" This is not a question about an afterlife. It is a question about living in God's Kingdom here on earth. This is a world where there is peace and joy and hope for all of creation. He runs up and kneels before Jesus while asking this question. This is a posture more typical of those urgently asking for healing, so we should interpret the man as profoundly struggling in some way. His question presupposes that "eternal life" is inherited by those who have "done" certain things. "What must I do...?" Jesus responds in a way that says you're looking at this in the wrong way: salvation doesn't go to those who "do good" and win the prize. Only God is good. Salvation isn't earned. You cannot rely on your own efforts, your own resources, and your own "goodness." Salvation is a gift from God, unearned, undeserved, and free!

"You lack one thing," Jesus says, which seems ironic since with his "many possessions" it seems he would lack nothing. What he lacks, therefore, is not *something* but a certain *state* of being, a *way* of being, an orientation, an attitude, a way of seeing the world that connects him with others. He needs a relationship with God, with others, and with Jesus that helps him to see his connection with the world. He lacks trust in God and generosity towards others.

What the man misses is how his wealth has worked against connection. How he has revered his riches over relationships. How he has rejected community for the sake of acquiring more. What Jesus offers the rich man is, perhaps, a relationship perceivably out of his reach or that he has shunned and then used his riches so as to fill the void. Jesus doesn't stop at "sell all of your possessions" but "sell what you own and give the money to the poor." This is a mandate to look outside of himself. A command to imagine that life's worth can never be met by the self alone. This is the danger of wealth—its lure toward a belief in utter self-sufficiency. Jesus comes along and tells us the truth.

I think the good news in this scripture comes when we remember everywhere else in Mark when a person kneels down to beseech Jesus (verse 17), it is in regard to a request for healing, for him or herself or for someone else. Might Mark therefore view this scene as a healing and invite us to do the same? Looking at it this way, Jesus' words are not an impossible demand or Herculean test of faith or extreme requirement. Rather, they are a radical prescription to a deep-seated illness and need.

As we struggle together to figure out what Jesus wants us to do with our economic blessings, we can take heart that Jesus sees us, loves us, calls us forward, and above all, that "for God, all things are possible."

Think about it – Pray about it – Live it

Bob