

“What owns you?”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
October 14, 2018

*Mark 10:17-31*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

In a comic strip based on today’s lectionary—yes, believe it or not, there are lectionary-based comics—one sheep says to another, “This reading is a big relief to me.” Confused, the other sheep responds, “Really? You’re not challenged by Jesus’ call to sell everything?” The sheep says, “Nah! At the rate I’m working through the rest of the commandments, I’ll never get to that one.”

Most of us, of course, don’t find relief in this passage. We walk away from it, disturbed and grieving, just like the rich man in our story. Does Jesus really mean to say that we can only be saved if we give up our houses, our clothes, our savings accounts, and walk barefoot in the streets?

Some Christians interpret this passage to mean exactly that. Shane Claiborne became famous for his part in the New Monastic Movement, which invites Christians to sell their possessions and live communally among the poor. Christian life is about radical solidarity with those who are suffering. Others take this passage less literally. David Lose remembers how during college, InterVarsity taught him that “what Jesus really meant was that we needed to unburden ourselves of whatever might be keeping us from relying on God. That might be wealth, but it might not be.” Others of a more Calvinist bent say that’s all wrong; this is about grace. They argue that Jesus is pointing out the impossibility of earning salvation; it’s up to God to save us.

Truth is Jesus never explains why he asks this man to give up his possessions, or why wealth makes it so hard to enter the kingdom of God.

What we do know is that this man comes to Jesus seeking help. He falls to his knees, in the sand and the dirt, and he looks up at Jesus, searching for an answer. He kneels like all the other people in Mark who come to Jesus to be healed. He knows that as wonderful as his life appears, there’s something missing, something that’s stopping him from being happy, “something that’s a matter of life and death” (David Lose).

We also know that it’s never occurred to him that God might just *give* him what he’s looking for. He thinks he has to earn it. “What must I do?” he asks.

We know that he asks this question only for himself. He doesn’t ask how his community can be saved. He thinks of his salvation only.

When Jesus answers him, he turns and walks away. He chooses to remain sick. Even if it means eternal life, even if it means finding that “something” he’s been searching for, the man cannot bear to part with his possessions. He’s too afraid to face life without them—too afraid to lose the security, and the status, and the comfort they afford. He no longer owns these possessions; they own him.

I wonder: what owns you?

In the same comic strip, the first sheep asks, “Why is Jesus so hard on the rich guy?” The other responds, “Well, he’s got so much stuff. He can’t see a way to give it up to follow Jesus.” The first sheep shouts, “Boy! I wish I had that problem!” Pausing for a moment, the other answers, “Maybe you do.”

Is there something in your life that has become so important, so habitual, that you can’t imagine parting with it? Is there something that’s holding onto you so tightly that it won’t let your life move forward, won’t let you follow Christ?

For a lot of us, it *is* money; it’s the creature comforts of life, the new car, the new iPhone, the expensive vacation. It is an economic system predicated on keeping other people poor. But maybe for you it’s something else. Perhaps it’s fear that’s holding onto you—a constant worry about tomorrow, about being good enough, a need to be perfect and in control. Or perhaps it’s ambition and pride—that sense of superiority you’ve got to protect, masquerading as career, or righteousness, or intelligence. Or is it your appearance and beauty that has mastered you? Or your popularity? Or your busy schedule?

At one time these were just means to life. That’s why we bought that house, or worked those long hours. But somewhere along the line, they stopped being a means, and they became an end. The house became a mortgage payment, and a roof that needs fixing, and a yard that needs mowing, and suddenly we’re living for a house.

The problem with all these little masters of our lives is that they deceive us into thinking that they’ll make us safe and happy. They make us feel full, when in actuality we are quite empty.

I think that’s what Jesus saw when he looked upon this man and his suffering. I know that the passage is harsh. Yet, I am struck by three little words: “Jesus loved him.” Mark says that Jesus looks at this man, and *in love for him*, asks him to give up his possessions. It’s love—not a radical political philosophy, not condemnation, but love—that inspires Jesus’ invitation. He desires this man to be free.

And in doing so, Jesus tries to tell this man three things:

First, to live in the kingdom of God, we must be freed of all other kings. Nothing other than God can give us the purpose, the joy, the life we seek. There must be nothing more important to us than loving God. Other things are fine—family, work, entertainment—as long as they are expressions of that love. They can be how we worship God, but they can’t become what we worship.

Second, to live in the kingdom of God, we must love our neighbor more than our own life. It’s for this reason that Jesus quotes only from the second half of the Ten Commandments, those laws related to human interaction: do not murder, do not steal, do not lie. It’s for this reason that Jesus tells the rich man to give the money to the poor. Jesus points him to a salvation that is interwoven with the wellbeing of others. It’s this weird thing: the moment we stop worrying about our life is the moment we start truly living.

Third, to live in the kingdom of God, we must rely on God. When the disciples hear Jesus talk about how hard it is to enter the kingdom, they ask, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looks at them, just as he looked at the rich man, and says, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” If only the rich man had not walked away, if only he had stayed and tried, even failed, he would have discovered that Jesus was there to carry the weight for him. God didn’t ask for success; God asked for trust.

To trust that God will be there to give him the life he seeks.

Remember the question: “What must I do to *inherit* eternal life?” The thing about inheritances is that they aren’t earned; they’re given. Inheritance isn’t about what you do; it’s about belonging to family and trusting in that family.

And when you belong to this family of God, you take care of your family members; you love and honor the One who created you and sustains you; and you trust that, even when you mess up, your family will be there to love you and carry the weight.

That’s what Jesus wanted the rich man to hear. But he couldn’t because there were too many things getting in the way. In a lot of ways, the rich man was like those of us who have struggled with addiction. He kept coming back to those possessions, that fix, even though they were hurting him and hurting others. But, you know, every Thursday and Friday, in this church, people just like that man meet for AA, and they share their stories, and they walk their steps. It’s a daily battle for them. It’s really hard. And it’s never over. That old master is always trying to get a hold on them again. But they have this family through AA. And if they mess up, they’re there to pick them up again, and keep on walking.

I think we can learn something from these men and women who fight every day to make God their only God. You look at their lives now, and you see how better their relationships are, how much more fulfilled they are, how much kinder. And I think they’d tell you it’s not because they’re so strong; it’s because they realized something that maybe some of us haven’t realized yet—that when you’ve got a family like this, a family that will go to the cross for you, a family that stands by you through night and storm, you don’t need anything else. Not drink. Not wealth. Not fear. Not pride. Not busyness or beauty or popularity. Because you’ve got something better. You’ve got the best God of all. You’ve got Love. **Amen.**