

“Opening to Let Light Shine Through”

A Sermon Shared with St. Andrew’s United Church

October 7, 2018 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Reading: Mark 10:17-31

by The Rev. Dave Le Grand

Karoline Lewis from Working Preacher suggests the conventional translation is: “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,” better translated, however, Jesus says to the rich man, “you are lacking *in* one thing,” that is, the difference between a noun and a verb.

What he lacks, therefore, is not something but a certain state of being, a way of being, an orientation in the world and toward the world life is bound to relationship -- a relationship with Jesus, and therefore, identity known in and because of community.¹ I think we know that, and probably hear that regularly in sermons.

It’s an interesting exchange, Jesus and this man. This story with subtle differences is in 3 different Gospels: In the other two Gospels, the man Jesus meets is referred to as a “ruler” in one and he is young in the other. He is just a “man” here. He could be any of us, really. Except that he is a bit of a theological know-it-all, he follows all the rules, knows the commandments.

But he wants to know what he must *do* to *inherit eternal life*. Now, at a very simplistic level, we all know that, generally speaking, one does not *earn* an inheritance. They are just given.

Jesus response is very interesting:

sell what you own, and give the money to the poor,
and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me. [V 21]

The story doesn’t end there because Jesus uses a teaching moment when he says to his disciples:

How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God... [v 23]

Ok let me take a moment here to remind you Jesus never condemns people for having wealth. To be quite logical about it: giving away all your money is not at all good stewardship!

In ancient times – the period when the story of Job was written, but also later, when Mark’s Gospel circulated – it was widely believed that being righteous, that is, living according to the commandments, assured you a prosperous life. It was equally considered conventional wisdom in those times that if you were plagued with problems,

¹ Karoline Lewis, October 14, *What Do You lack?* <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5232>

as Job was, then you must have been doing something wrong. Amazing then, that the book of Job that flies in the face of that wisdom, a prosperity Gospel that still enjoys airtime today, amazing that Job was included in what became the Bible.

I'm grateful to be in a Christian tradition that does NOT believe how faithful a person you are is reflected in how prosperous or how destitute you are. We won't see the prayer for a private jet for your minister being included in the upcoming Stewardship Program.

The disciples also are perplexed as Jesus addresses them:

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. [v25]

Not only is the image of a camel squeezing through the eye of a needle image absurd, but the idea of prosperity possibly being a hurdle to salvation, that was unimaginable then, and in some circles, still today!

Jesus' responds similarly to both the man and the disciples, both of whom were focused on their personal salvation; Jesus uses the, kingdom, I instead use the word kin-dom, and the kin-dom vision for Jesus is about community.

As scholar David B. Howell states:

Life in the kingdom of God is about transformation and character change... ²
And, he says, it is often one small step to begin. Opening one's mind to a new way of thinking, the way of Jesus. Like an alcoholic who recognizes that they need help, they reach out for help, so our baby step is to acknowledge that we cannot do it on our own – our healthy savings, our stable career, and contributions as a volunteer – none will get us into the kin-dom of God. *It is not what we do that matters, it is our orientation towards God.*

Very early in my ministry within a large Oshawa church I found myself at loggerheads with a parishioner there. I had said something in passing with the children about one big corporation and its treatment of employees. Well, this gentleman, I'll call him Bob, told me straightforwardly that he was not impressed, and that the CEO of that corporation I spoke of was a very good friend of his.

I later found out that Bob was retired, but that he himself had worked for a large pharmaceutical corporation; he had become a Vice President. Our pastoral relationship improved considerably through the years and one day Bob tells me that he might have cancer; after a battery of tests he would know within the month.

A few weeks later he bounced into my office to share with me the great news – the tests were negative. A stunning thing happened next, he asked me: "Rev. Dave, I am so thankful. I want to give back, so do you have any ideas about how I can make a difference?"

² David B. Howell. Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).

I could think of many ways, but I knew that the downtown drop in had been struggling to stay open. I knew that Bob's skills were in marketing. So I suggested he join the Board of Directors for Gate 3:16.

I had never seen such a sight one day as I walked downtown and saw Bob, now with the street nickname "Pops" flanked by patrons of the drop in. It was no coincidence that the Drop In enjoyed an increase in donations over the remainder of the time I was there. He was proud of his nickname, and his relationships on the street.

Entering God's Kin-dom, following Jesus, is not something we do. It is a decision we make, I think, over and over again to let go of our pride, our ego that tells us that we are in control, and opening ourselves up to where God is calling us.

It is re-orienting ourselves from our personal spiritual needs to the community – to the needs of least among us. St. Andrew's United Church collectively underwent transformation when you took a risk and opened your doors to "Out of the Cold." But I think that Jesus, if he were here today, would say that it is not enough to open your doors. Each of us must time and again open our hearts to the people around us who are most vulnerable. The last in line brought to the front of the line, and the people at the front who thought they were VIPs - to the back of the line. Perhaps they get in, but they might have a bit of an attitude adjustment back there.

I think that that is what a first step might be, spiritually. After the disciples are flabbergasted by Jesus' assertion that it will be easier for a camel to thread the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God's kin-dom, the disciples are worried: Who then can be saved?

Jesus responds: For mortals it is impossible, but... for God all things are possible.

First step is to let go... and let God. Amen.