

## What Does God Have to Give Us?

*Mark 10: 17-27*

As he 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?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 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; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

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!” And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “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.” They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

A few years ago, on the Christmas episode of the sitcom, *The Big Bang Theory*, two of the show’s characters, Sheldon and Penny, were talking about exchanging Christmas presents:

“Don’t get me anything,” says Sheldon.

“But why not?” Penny asks.

“Because, then I’ll have to get you something.”

“Sheldon, you wouldn’t have to get me anything.”

“Sure I would. It’s how it works. You get me something and I have to get you something.”

“Well I already got you something,” insists Penny.

Sheldon is so distraught with guilt over how to reciprocate Penny’s gift that it keeps him awake at night until he finally formulates a calculated master plan: “I know what I’ll do!” he says. “I’ll get a variety of gifts baskets, some worth \$5, others \$10 and \$20, even \$100! And after I open Penny’s present I’ll fake some indigestion and excuse myself into the back room where I will look up the price of her gift online. Then I’ll find the gift that will appropriately reciprocate the value of her gift! Finally, I’ll return the rest of the leftover gifts for a full refund!” Problem solved. Transaction complete.

It’s a pericope of our transactional mindset isn’t it? A calculated quid pro quo in a ‘this for that’ society. Have you ever been out for lunch with someone who treated you to a meal the previous time? When it is time for the bill to come the server asks, “How shall I divide the check today?” And just before you get a chance to say a word, the person you’re having lunch with pulls out their credit card and says, “One check to me please.” “Now hold on a second,” we say, “you paid the bill last time. It’s my turn.” We keep track of the generosity and feel the need to reciprocate,

to complete the transaction. If we are honest, it happens in church too. I remember being a first-time visitor at a church. It was time for the offering plate to get passed around; and as the usher handed me the plate a wave of guilt washed over me because I had forgotten to put cash in my wallet before I left home. So to ease the tension of the awkward moment I reached into my pocket, opened up the wallet and then acted surprised when I discovered that I had nothing inside. "I'm sorry," I said as I dramatically spread open the inside flap of my wallet, showing the usher to prove it, "There is nothing inside." It was almost an Oscar winning performance. Except, as usher was looking down at me, his expression was one that said, "*Uh huh, I've seen this act before.*" The musicians, the sermon, the lights humming overhead all comes with a price tag attached. Sheldon's right, "It's how it works. You get me something, I feel the need to get you something." It's our transactional, quid pro quo, 'this for that' mindset.

In our bibles the man who approaches Jesus asks a transactional question: What do I have to do to inherit eternal life? What is the transactional relationship between what I have to give of myself in order to be given a life that lasts? It is an interesting question for a couple of reasons. First, it's interesting because we can't *do* anything to inherit something. Second, it's interesting because it is not a question we hear being asked while standing in line at Crisis Control Ministry. Not a question on the tip of our tongue after losing power this weekend in the aftermath of the hurricane. It is not a question a single mother working three jobs asks when she is holding the eviction notice in one hand while staring into an empty pantry. It seems to be a privileged question. A question coming from someone who has enough in this life to begin setting up all the necessary pieces for the next one. "What do I have to do to inherit a life that lasts?"

Well, what does Jesus say? He tells him to follow the commandments. Names some of them and adds "Don't defraud." The man says, "I've done these since I was born." I go to church, I say my prayers, I contribute by giving my 10%. I treat my neighbor fairly." And Jesus looks at him, loves him for his faithfulness and says, "There is still one thing you lack. Sell everything, give the cash to the poor and follow me."

Now I'm not sure about you, but the scene makes we wonder if Jesus is looking at us with those loving eyes of his while naming what we're lacking too? After all, if you're anything like me, you are not willing to give it all away. I am willing to give the guy who stands on the corner a dollar for a newspaper—or even a twenty if I'm in a good mood—but I am not willing to cash in my children's college fund to do so. I am willing to buy a hungry person a meal or a gift card at the grocery store, but I am not going to sell the family heirlooms at the pawn shop to do so. Perhaps Jesus would see that what I lack is trust; I don't trust God enough to do it. Maybe he'd see that I'm afraid of living in poverty. I've seen what poverty looks like and I don't want to ever have to make the decision between paying the mortgage and feeding my children. Jesus looks at the man, loves him and names what he is lacking. It makes me wonder if Jesus is telling me what I'm lacking too.

Well, what do we make of the story? After all, Jesus isn't being metaphorical here. But I also don't think Jesus wants us to live naked, hungry and homeless. You see, what the rich man was lacking wasn't his faithfulness, *it was his freedom*. Yesterday at PRIDE, as we marched, our children handed out rainbow beads, pinwheels and candy as we carried our banner. As we passed the crowds most people yelled, "Thank you Trinity!" Then, of course, there were a few others with judgmental bible verses on picket signs who shook their heads at us in disapproval as we passed by. It was sad to think that if one of our children offered them a beady rainbow necklace, or a pinwheel or a piece of candy they probably wouldn't be able to receive it because they were clinging to tightly to their signs and they couldn't receive the gift, even from a child. But Jesus loves the rich man. It is the only time in Mark's gospel it says Jesus loves someone. It is also the only time in the gospel where someone chooses not to follow Jesus when he asks them to. What the rich man was lacking wasn't his faithfulness, it was his freedom.

So here's my question: what would God have to give us in order for us to be so overwhelmed that we would be free to give it all away? What would God have to give us?

Remember Sheldon and Penny. The moment came when they finally exchanged gifts. Remember Sheldon's plan where he has an array of presents in the back room to reciprocate Penny's gift.

"You open your gift first," Penny says as she offers Sheldon a nicely wrapped box with a bow on it. Sheldon unwraps the paper, opens the box and...

"Oh," he says, "It's a cloth napkin..."

"Now turn it over."

On the other side of napkin reads a note: "To Sheldon: Live long and prosper. Love, Leonard Nemoy [aka Spock]."

Sheldon's jaw drops as he falls out of his chair in shock. Penny explains:

"He came into the restaurant I work at and so I got his autograph for you. I'm sorry it is dirty, he wiped his mouth on it."

Sheldon doubles over: "You mean I possess the DNA of Leonard Nemoy! Hold on just a minute."

Sheldon runs off into the back room, grabs every gift basket varying from \$5 to \$100, he stumbles out of the room laying all of the gifts before her.

"Sheldon, what are you doing?" she asks.

"I know," he says, "It's not enough."

What would God have to give us for us to be so overwhelmed that we would be free enough to give it all away? My hunch is when we answer the question, we will more than likely be naming something God has already given us. If only, we are free enough to receive it.