

A Lesson for the “Blessed”

Mark 10: 17-27

¹⁷As he was setting out on a journey, a person ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁸Jesus said, “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 person said, “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 he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³Then 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.”

A friend once noticed that all the stories we agree with we claim should be taken literally, while all the stories we disagree with we claim should be taken metaphorically. So what do we do with the story of Jesus and the wealthy person? St. Francis of Assisi took the passage literally. So he sold his estate and gave all the inheritance money away—living into the gospel of poverty. While others have pointed out that Jesus is challenging the thought that the rich man’s blessed life came from his following God’s commandments—what we know as the gospel of prosperity. Truth is, the jury is still out. After all, we have a lot, but selling everything isn’t a reality for us either. So how do we read the story: literally or metaphorically?

The story is complex so let’s unpack it. We have a person of privilege—formally known as the “rich man” although the person is genderless in the story—literally stops Jesus in his tracks because his question is so important. “Good Teacher,”—a bit of flattery given earns a bit of flattery returned—“Good Teacher, what must I do to have the ultimate good life?” As an outsider, doesn’t it already appear this blessed person has a good life? But still, even the privileged feel like something is missing. We might know how that feels. “Good teacher, what must I do to possess more joy?” “Good teacher, what must I do to feel complete.” “Good teacher, what must I do to leave a positive mark on the world?” Most of us who have lived a blessed life carry with us the same sense that there is more, don’t we?

But you gotta love Jesus’ uncuffed response: “No one is good but the one God.” His response reminds me of something they say in AA: “Do you want the truth, or are you asking me to cosign on your B.S.?” Jesus continues, “You know what to do,” and then he lists the social commandments. In return the blessed person says, “I do all those things. Since I was a kid I paid attention to what the bible said about following the commandments. I took them literally. If you follow them, God will bless you. And if you don’t you will not be blessed. Look at me, I’ve been

blessed, which means I've been faithful." We aren't dealing with an evil person here. We're dealing with someone who believes their blessings are a result of their faithfulness.

It's probably why Jesus looks at him with love as he names it for him. He says, "You're missing the one thing. If you want to live as one with God, sell what you have and give the money to the poor. And walk my path." Now, how do we understand his words? I mean, there is no question Jesus cares about economic justice. We have so much stuff!—so maybe we read it literally, that we are being called into the gospel of poverty. But does this mean Jesus wants us to become homeless and hungry? Or maybe Jesus is challenging the gospel of prosperity—that our being "good" is not the reason we are blessed. Or perhaps it is a little bit of both.

You see, I think Jesus is saying, "My beloved child, you think God has blessed you with a good life because you are good, and out of gratitude you do what you're supposed to do. But if for one second you believe that all you have: your wealth, your privilege, your good life belongs to you—that you possess it—then you're missing the point. You see, a blessing stops being a blessing the moment we believe we possess it. It's no longer a blessing but instead becomes a possession."

You see, what God is about, what God has always been about, is bestowing blessings on the world. We are created in the image of the God who blesses the world. It's what God called Abraham to be—a blessing to all nations. And it's why today when someone dies, our Jewish friends say, "May their memory be a blessing." Because it is all about blessing, blessing, blessing!

Beloved Trinity, we are a blessed people. We have a building. We have resources. We have each other. All are blessings, which will cease to be a blessing unless at some point we are willing to let them go. I am also aware that we have lost blessings over the past couple of years. For some, our health has declined. For others, our resources have waned. For others, we've lost something or we've lost someone important to us. And there is nothing as painful as losing our most beloved blessings. But the truth is, all the blessings we've had—from what we've acquired to the relationships in our lives—are not possessions that are ours, they are blessings who belong to God. The blessed wealthy person walks away from Jesus' invitation grieved. Why? Because, it says, he had many possessions.

Over the summer, we went to the beach. For our youngest kiddo, getting into the wild waves can be a bit intimidating. So instead, he would hang out where the water kissed the shoreline, building sandcastles. Sometimes I would help him as we shoveled sand into buckets and began to form them with our hands. "I want to build a sandcastle that will be here forever," he said. I said, "Okay!" but we all know that a sandcastle's life expectancy is only as long as the next high tide. He would get frustrated when a big swell would unexpectedly come up and wipe out all that work. So we'd move higher up and begin building some more. And another big wave would come through and reach the new spot as it washed away what we had done. Now one day he might be in therapy talking about this moment, but for me the blessing wasn't the sandcastle, it was the time we got to spend working on it. The time we have, all the stuff we have, eventually it's all carried back into the sea, because it's all a blessing that flows from and belongs to God.

Anne Frank once said, “No one ever became poor by giving.” And no matter how many times we might get it wrong, holding onto what we have, there will always be another opportunity to get it right. God continues to be God. Offering grace. Offering strength. Offering blessings. The opportunities keep coming because God’s blessings keep coming. So may we, Trinity, give thanks for the blessings we have. May we give thanks for the blessing we are. And may we have the grace and the courage to allow the blessing to remain a blessing by being willing to let it go. Amen.