

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

There are a number of people here at Grace who listen carefully to my sermons and sometimes give me feedback. Sometimes that feedback is positive. Sometimes they have questions about what I have said and are looking for some clarification. And sometimes they take issue with what I have preached. Always I appreciate the feedback, and sometimes I agree, even with criticism. That happened a few years ago when someone who knows their stuff told me that I was being too easy on you in my preaching. Following Jesus is hard, this person said, and I'm always letting you off the hook. Now I don't see my preaching as ever letting you off the hook, but I take the larger point. We've been through some important teachings of Jesus recently that take us to task for how we live our lives and call for repentance, a change of heart and attitude. This is serious stuff, and Jesus means what he says. And sometimes it might be helpful to just let us sit with the seriousness of Jesus words for a week or two. After all, that's how Jesus did it with his disciples. Especially in Mark, it took a long time for Jesus' words to sink in for the disciples. And actually, with Mark's abrupt ending, it's not entirely clear that they ever did. Not *entirely* clear, but we have hints. Anyway, even though I sympathize with the point that this person was making, I have pastoral reasons for not employing that strategy. For one thing, unlike Jesus' disciples who were with him constantly, not everyone at Grace is here every week. If I left you without any good news one week in order to encourage you to ponder the importance of Jesus' hard words, you might not be here the following week when I actually deliver the good news. And that might leave you with a distorted view of your relationship with God. The other reason is my understanding of the preaching task, which is to make sure you hear both law and gospel every week, both the bad news that calls out our sin and lack of faith, and the good news that gives us a way forward, that allows the Holy Spirit to *create* the faith in us that is lacking, faith that trusts in God's life-giving promises for Jesus sake. But I wanted you to hear this criticism and to appreciate the truth in it. Following Jesus *is* hard. It is serious business. It is countercultural, a call to live differently, with different values from the ones that dominate our society and culture. Bear that in mind as I finish my sermon this morning with the good news, because Jesus' seriousness is not negated by the good news.

And speaking of culture, there are some things in this encounter of Jesus and the rich man that we tend to miss on a casual first reading precisely because we are unaware of the cultural differences embedded in this story. First, this encounter is not like Jesus' encounters with the Pharisees, those good church people of the day who were clearly out to get him. The rich man's approach to Jesus is sincere. In spite of his status and success by the standards of the time, he is searching for more. He is searching for life that is meaningful and lasting. Yet even so, his kneeling before Jesus and the first words out of his mouth, what we might take as simple politeness, are an implicit challenge. By addressing Jesus as "good teacher," he is pointing out that Jesus has set himself above others. So, besides seeking Jesus' teaching, he is also saying, "prove yourself." As we have already seen a couple of times in Mark, Jesus wants to keep his identity as the Messiah a secret. So, Jesus parries the rich man's challenge by directing the focus to God and what God has already said to the people of Israel in the commandments. It's a counter-challenge: "you should already know what to do." "I've done that," says the rich man, again, quite sincerely. In spite of his earlier challenge, he is not out to trap Jesus like the Pharisees in last week's text. He wants a real answer.

And then our text says that Jesus looked at him and “loved him.” Jesus is moved by this man’s sincerity. He is sympathetic to his desire to be faithful to God. But he has to push deeper. “Almost there,” he might have been thinking. But what he says is, “sell all that you have and give it to the poor. Then come, follow me.” But the rich man can’t do it. He is “shocked” by Jesus’ response, and goes away “grieving,” because, says our text, he had many possessions. Hidden behind that last piece of information is what it meant to be rich in this time and place. This is about property, but also about status as the head of a family and a patron of others. In other words, Jesus is asking him to give up on an entire way of life, a privileged way of life in which he is in control, a way of life in which he is in charge of property and other people. But the kingdom of God, the eternal life that this man seeks, does not work like that. It is no accident, I think, that this story comes immediately after Jesus talks to the disciples about receiving the kingdom of God as a dependent child. Who is less willing to be dependent than those with power, wealth, and privilege? And not just the mega rich, but folks like you and me as well.

There are lots of ways we have pushed back against this hard teaching of Jesus in the history of the church. We have said that Jesus’ words here apply only to *this* rich man, and not *all* rich men. And then Jesus’ saying about the camel and the eye of the needle led someone in the nineteenth century to suggest that there was a small gate in the walls of Jerusalem that was called the eye of the needle that it was difficult to get a camel through. Difficult, but not impossible, you see. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that there was ever such a thing as the “eye of the needle” gate. But to play these kinds of games with this text is to ignore what the disciples clearly noticed: that Jesus is asking something so difficult that it is hard to imagine anyone being willing to live up to this standard. It’s why they are moved ask him, “Who can be saved?” “For humans it is impossible,” Jesus answers, “...but for God all things are possible.” Notice, though, that in saying this, Jesus does not change the conditions. The truth remains that the kingdom of God, the eternal life that we and the rich man seek, is a radically different way of life than the one we are currently invested in. It is a way of life that is willing to make real sacrifices for the sake of others. What that meant for the rich man in our Gospel reading was giving up his power, his security, and his status. It meant being willing to challenge the “way things work.” And it means the same thing for us.

What makes this all the more urgent for us is the clarity we have come to in recent years that the way things work in our time is leading us down a disastrous path. We will have to do something about our ways of life that contribute to climate change. We will have to do something about the social and economic problems that keep so many in poverty while enriching a very few. We will have to do something about our political and cultural polarization, and our growing inability to even talk to each other. But asking us to change a way of life that benefits us now and in the short term in order to help our neighbor and future generations is simply not something most of us are willing to do. It’s seems impossible for us in our current condition.

But it is not impossible for God. Mark’s gospel is leading us to the death and resurrection of Jesus, which confront and defeat the power of sin, death, and evil, so that the Holy Spirit may create in us new hearts that are willing and eager to trust God and reject all the ways of the world that draw us away from God and one another. God means to work the impossible in and through us. That will be a constant struggle throughout our lives, but it’s a struggle that God means to win. You are not off the hook, and it won’t be easy. But God is looking at you and loving you, and is determined to see you through to the new and everlasting life that you seek. Trust that promise made to you in Holy Baptism. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.