

## *Reality Check*

A Sermon on Mark 10:17-31 by the Rev. Philip Major

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*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.”*

I begin with the surprising pronouncement that this passage is Good News for us. I am here to encourage you to not lose heart, but to take courage from these words. In our Gospel reading Jesus tells of the power of God's grace and the radical freedom experienced by those who enter into the life of God's community. The message was difficult for Jesus' first disciples to understand. It is difficult for us to understand.

As is typical for Mark, this passage is dense and woven thick with meaning. It is like we are given the main story line, without much explanation attached. In order to understand the Good News, let's look at it in detail.

We begin with a dramatic scene: *As Jesus 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?”* In order to understand what follows, let's try to get inside the head of the man who runs up and kneels before Jesus.

Consider his actions and words. What can we tell about him? The man proclaims that he has kept the commandments since his youth. My observation is that he is very bold. He runs up in front of Jesus and a small crowd of people and stops them in their tracks. This man is very sure of himself. Notice that he asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

This is a person who takes charge. He is confident he can get the job done quickly and efficiently. He also has a way of using words to leverage his power. Jesus points this out. "Why do you call me good?" You call me good because you are trying to get more control in this situation.

Kneeling is often a sign of reverence. In this story the man is taking a reverential act and using it to his advantage, to interrupt someone else's conversation and demand an audience with Jesus. Jesus sees through the man's manipulative words and actions. Yet he still loves him.

The directions Jesus gives are in direction proportion to the man's cleverness and confidence. If you are so bold and powerful, *go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.* Of course the man was shocked, just as many of Jesus' disciples were no doubt shocked when this man threw himself in front of them, blocked the way, and proclaimed he had kept all of the commandments from the day of his birth.

This is a story about our desire for control, our desire for power, and our feelings of entitlement. The man is confident and proud of his perfect record. He has no doubt he can master this new challenge, which is simply to inherit eternal life. I will paraphrase his question to Jesus. He says, "I have been very successful in life. I have no doubt I can master this challenge as well. Just give me the directions, and I'll take care of the rest!"

This is a story about our lack of control and the power of God's grace. The story doesn't sound encouraging to us, but sometimes we don't need encouragement. Sometimes we need a reality check. Sometimes we need an accurate picture of our situation. We are not going to do something to inherit eternal life.

We may enter into this journey, into a way of being, which I would call the kingdom life. But we enter into the way of God's kingdom or queendom, not through our power, but by giving up our power. This is what Jesus says in the middle portion of the passage.

*“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.”*

It is impossible for us to save ourselves. This is just as true for the rich as for the poor. The poor are unable to save themselves and the rich are unable to save themselves. The shocking part of the story is not this idea. Most people, in all ages in all times have understood they don't have this kind of power.

The shock comes only for the rich. They are in the habit of thinking they are in control. For this reason, there is an extra burden on those who are rich. The burden comes from the feelings of entitlement and pride they carry in their hearts. The extra burden is totally within the hearts and minds of the rich.

Jesus' words are proved true in countless situations in every time and place. We see many situations where those who are wealthy and powerful live in a way that takes them very far from God's kingdom. We see many stories of the poor and common working people entering into the ways of God's kingdom.

We see this in real life. Those with lower incomes tend to be more generous in giving to others. Those who are closer to living in poverty often give more actual dollars to the poor, than do the rich. The poor are less likely to cling to the illusion they are in control, that they can achieve anything important through their efforts alone. The rich find it harder to enter into this kingdom of love, justice and joy.

Which leads us to another idea. *"For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."* We cannot enter into the life of God's kingdom on our own. Through God's grace we may enter into God's way of love and hope and joy.

This is directly related to last week's Gospel message, that we must enter the Kingdom of God as children. We are not in control. We don't have the power to accomplish the most important things in life. This is a stark wake up call for us, and for the disciples.

The disciples are very much like us. Like us, the disciples raise their voices in protest. "Jesus, look at all of the good works we have done!" Jesus offers God's grace. In response, the disciples begin to panic about their loss of control. This is what is going on in the final portion of the passage.

Let me paraphrase the exchange. The disciples say, "But Jesus, we have given everything we have. We have worked for years and given lots of money to support the cause." Jesus says, "Calm down. No one who has dedicated themselves to God's work will be separated from the kingdom of God. In that fellowship of love you will find yourself surrounded by new sisters and brothers. In that community you will be welcomed into the homes of others and find true hospitality. Though you will go through times of persecution and distress but you will not be alone. Just remember, this isn't happening because you are the hardest working, or the most clever, or the first disciples. Many who consider themselves to be the first or the best will be last. And many who have been considered as lowly or losers will be first."

Jesus is pointing to the reality that feelings of entitlement and superiority are not restricted to those who have riches. Most of the disciples did not come from positions of privilege. This passage and other conversations we will hear in coming weeks reveal the disciples are not understanding Jesus' message of servant leadership. The disciples remind me of the young woman who said to the older woman in a loud voice, "Check your privilege." She was probably correct; the older woman needed to check her privilege. But the young woman also needed to check her privilege, her feeling of entitlement. The disciples need to check their feelings of privilege.

So this is a story of truth telling. It's a story about our feelings of entitlement, about the truth that we are equal, about the blessings of God's community, and about the gift of God's grace for all people. I hope you are encouraged by Jesus' words, though they were shocking Jesus' disciples and to the bold man who stopped Jesus and his disciples in their tracks.

Remember we are already living the kingdom life, which is a life of community, of brotherhood and sisterhood. Remember Jesus' invites us into a life that is distinctly non-competitive. We are often obsessed with who is the best, with who is the most attractive, with who is the first. Jesus is not. Remember that, though so much of life feels impossible, we rely on God's grace. In that grace we find a life of love and joy. In that grace we feel God's strength and peace in our hearts.