

AN ALTAR IN THE WORLD: A GEOGRAPHY OF FAITH
The Practice of Encountering Others: Community

A sermon offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Mark 10: 17-31

(from **The Message** by Eugene Peterson)

As he went out into the street, a man came running up, greeted him with great reverence, and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to get eternal life?"

Jesus said, "Why are you calling me good? No one is good, only God. You know the commandments: Don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't lie, don't cheat, honor your father and mother."

He said, "Teacher, I have -- from my youth -- kept them all!"

Jesus looked him hard in the eye -- and loved him! He said, "There's one thing left: Go sell whatever you own and give it to the poor. All your wealth will then be heavenly wealth. And come follow me."

The man's face clouded over. This was the last thing he expected to hear, and he walked off with a heavy heart. He was holding on tight to a lot of things, and not about to let go.

Looking at his disciples, Jesus said, "Do you have any idea how difficult it is for people who "have it all" to enter God's kingdom?" The disciples couldn't believe what they were hearing, but Jesus kept on: "You can't imagine how difficult. I'd say it's easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for the rich to get into God's kingdom."

That set the disciples back on their heels. "Then who has any chance at all?" they asked.

Jesus was blunt: "No chance at all if you think you can pull it off by yourself. Every chance in the world if you let God do it."

Peter tried another angle: "We left everything and followed you."

Jesus said, "Mark my words, no one who sacrifices house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children, land -- whatever -- because of me and the Message will lose out. They'll get it all back, but multiplied many times in homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and land--but also in troubles. And then the bonus of eternal life! This is once again the Great Reversal: Many who are first will end up last, and the last first."

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He said, "There's one thing left: Go sell whatever you own and give it to the poor.
All your wealth will then be heavenly wealth. And come follow me."

Mark 10:21

Jesus has been messing with me lately. Here lately he has been saying all kinds of crazy, preposterous things. Have you been listening lately to what has been said around here?

Last week, Rev. Barbara Battin had us hearing about Jesus' highly prejudiced comment that he made to the Syrophenecian woman, saying "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," basically calling her a dog.

Now we might expect that kind of comment from a racist or a homophobe or a misogynist, but not from our Jesus. And then, to make matters worse, Jesus, moved by the woman's witness, went and changed his mind about her and blessed her. What kind of representative of God is this Jesus, if he has to be taught, um, corrected, by a literal nobody from the margins?

By the way, Barbara's sermon last Sunday, "World House or Tree House: Who sits at your Table?" is an excellent companion to our theme this morning on "The Practice of Encountering Others: Community." After hearing her sermon last week, I wondered to myself why I had not just given her this particular chapter of Barbara Brown Taylor's book and been done with it.

The week before that, the Rev. Candace Chellew-Hodge had us considering Jesus' parable about the "Laborers in the Vineyard." This is a highly incendiary story, where Jesus says the boss hired laborers one day to work his fields. Some started at six in the morning, others started at 9 and noon and 3 and 5, and all of them, no matter what time they started, agreed to work for the daily wage. Then, at 6 o'clock in the evening, when it came time to receive their pay for their day's labor, the boss paid everyone the exact same amount – equal pay for unequal work! Those working 1 hour made the same as those who worked 12 hours. And of course, those who worked more for less "grumbled against the landowner." And of course, the boss brushed aside all of their complaints and said, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

Who does this kind of stuff and gets away with it? It is a story that never sets well in our workaholic, materialistic, "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" culture of ours.

And then three weekends ago, the Rev. Roselin Runnels, had us entering into an argument between the disciples over who was the greatest and who was better than the other. And Jesus, seeming to have had enough of this foolishness, tartly called them all together and declared: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

Again, a tall order for a highly educated, professional people who strive to be successful, who are driven to be first and best.

If you missed any of the last three weekends, I would highly recommend that you go to crosscreekchurch.org and either read or listen to those sermons. These women preachers among us have been doing an excellent job of proclaiming the gospel. But be forewarned! Jesus might actually mess with you too. If you really listen to the Jesus gospel they were proclaiming!

So after three weekends of Jesus messing with me, I was glad at the thought of returning to my series AN ALTAR IN THE WORLD: A GEOGRAPHY OF FAITH. I was comforted at the thought of taking a breather from Jesus' more potent wisdom and resting in some safer spiritual insights and practices. So I was surprised to discover that the first biblical reference mentioned in Chapter 6, "The Practice of Encountering Others: Community," was Jesus' advice to the rich young ruler to go and sell all he had and give it to the poor. And lo and behold, it is that very text that is the lectionary gospel reading appointed for this 19th Sunday after Pentecost. So whether I wanted it or not, I felt my preaching text had been given to me.

And now *this* weekend, I am supposed to offer some reflection on Jesus' words that say: "Do you have any idea how difficult it is for people who "have it all" to enter God's kingdom?" Or as the New Revised Standard Version says it: "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God?"

And here we go. Jesus is messing with me again! And somehow, I am supposed to preach this bit of gospel wisdom to a mostly-affluent congregation from the "burbs?" I'm telling you, Jesus is starting to get on my nerves! I think I'd like to have my own "come to Jesus" meeting *with* Jesus! I think I'm ready to tell *him* a thing or two: "Hey Jesus, do you know how hard it is for preachers to keep their jobs when they are asked to preach this kind of stuff? Do you know how hard it is to keep attendance up and offerings flowing in when this kind of stuff is lifted up as good news to people who aren't looking for, or even wanting, this kind of news, whether you call it good or not?"

But I don't think Jesus would be persuaded by my objections or my arguments. My guess is he would probably just look me in the eye, like the rich young ruler, pat me on the back, smile, and love me, and say "Mike, you knew this line of work was going to be hard. You knew there would be "troubles" if you follow me. You know my way is counter-cultural, counter-intuitive. Don't back down now. And don't be afraid! You know your current cultural context is in deep need of the *good news* I came to offer...the good news I came to embody in my flesh."

So, I guess I will just jump right on in where angels fear to tread and do the best I can in proclaiming this gospel text before us. I will certainly take some solace in knowing that I am not the only one who has had trouble with Jesus in Church.

And just to be clear: I know my topic today is about "The Practice of Encountering Others: Community." I promise you, I will get to that. I do think this text has a helpful and hopeful word to offer on that subject. However, I feel I have got to deal with Jesus' comment about wealth first, or you'll never hear anything else I'm about to say.

I like the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases this Jesus story in his paraphrase of the bible called THE MESSAGE.: "

Looking at his disciples Jesus said, "Do you have any idea how difficult it is for people who "have it all" to enter God's kingdom?" The disciples couldn't believe what they were hearing, but Jesus kept on: "You can't imagine how difficult. I'd say it's easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for the rich to get into God's kingdom."

That set the disciples back on their heels.

"Then who has any chance at all?" they asked.

Jesus was blunt: "No chance at all if you think you can pull it off by yourself. Every chance in the world if you let God do it." Or, as it is commonly translated: "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; For God all things are possible.

This saying of Jesus about wealth has been a problem for the Church since its earliest days and it comes right from this story most of us know as the story of the rich young ruler. You might be interested to know that it is Mark who is the only one who suggests that he is rich. It is Matthew who is the only one who says that he is young. And it is Luke who is the only one who calls him a ruler. And what we get out of all three gospel accounts is this rich young ruler. And since this story is found in all three of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, we can feel fairly certain that story is rooted in the life and ministry of the historical Jesus. But truth be told, my guess is that most of us wish that this rich young ruler had never shown up at all in any of the gospels, and the response he elicited from Jesus to "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" still strikes terror in the hearts of would-be Christians everywhere.

From the earliest days of the Church until now preachers have tried to find every way possible to soften these words. Some preachers have tried the archeological approach and suggested that the "eye of the needle" may have actually been a tiny gate in the wall of Jerusalem. The gate was so small and so narrow that it was almost impossible to get a camel through it. But a camel could get through the gate if it got down on its knees. And so the implication of this sort of interpretation is that the rich can get into the kingdom, if they get down on their knees and pray about it. It may be really, really hard, but it is not impossible.

Recently, others have tried the linguistic approach and suggested that the word translated "camel" should really be translated "rope." In other words, "it would be easier for a rope to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God." But

whether the word is camel or rope, the saying makes the same point. It's hard, and seemingly impossible, but it still might be possible.

Another way of approaching this text is so see it as an example of good Jewish hyperbole and humor: an exaggerated way for Rabbi Jesus to make a strong point. "You want to know how hard it will be for a wealthy person to enter the Kingdom of God? Why, it would be easier for the Bengals to win the Super Bowl; it would be easier for a democrat to win an election in Centerville or Washington Township; it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle." You know what it means. It would be *almost* impossible.

But I am with James Somerville, one of my Baptist colleagues who noted that:

The clue to interpreting this saying is not to be found in the archaeology of ancient Jerusalem, or in the study of the Greek language, or in a discussion of how preachers tend to exaggerate. The clue is found in the response of Jesus' hearers. Mark says that when Jesus began to talk about camels and needles his disciples were "greatly astounded." They didn't think he was talking about a city gate in Jerusalem. They didn't think he really meant the word for "rope." They didn't think he was just using colorful language. They were "greatly astounded" at what he said. "Their eyes bugged out. Their jaws dropped. They whispered to each other in disbelief, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus says, "Ha! That's exactly my point! It's impossible!" He points to this rich young ruler as an example.

Mark says that Jesus was on his way to somewhere else when this man came up to him, fell to his knees (aha!) and asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" At first it seems that Jesus is trying to dismiss him: he begins by scolding the young man for calling him "good." Then he suggests (sarcastically?) that he might try keeping the commandments, naming a few of them at random. But this young man is earnest. He really wants eternal life. When Jesus takes a closer look at him he can see that, and he loves him for it. "All right, then," he seems to say. "All right. If you're serious about this, if you really want eternal life, here's what you have to do: Go, sell everything you have, give the money to the poor (and you will have treasure in heaven), and then come, follow me." For the longest time the man stands there, stuck between eternal life and eternal regret, and then he turns, sadly, and heads toward his comfortable home. "he had a lot of things," Mark explains.

Or did the things have him?

(James Somerville, "Letting Go," Lectionary Homiletics, October 11, 2009)

This seems to be direction of Oscar Wilde's commentary on this text. Yes, as strange as it may sound, even Oscar Wilde offered some thoughts on this text. He wrote:

When [Christ] says, "Forgive your enemies," it is not for the sake of the enemy, but for one's own sake that he says so, and because Love is more beautiful than hate. In his entreaty to the young man whom when he looked on he loved, "sell all that thou hast, and give to the poor, "it is not the state of the poor that he is thinking but of the soul of the young man, the lovely soul that wealth was marring. (Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*)

Have you ever considered that this question that the rich young ruler asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" is really a rich person's question? It seems to me that this is the kind of question posed by people whose bills are paid, whose income is steady and sure. It is the kind of question posited by someone who is not preoccupied with the more basic questions of survival, like "Where can I find a job?"; or "How am I going to have enough to put food on my table to feed the children and keep a roof over our heads, and provide heat in the winter?"; or "How will I pay for my cancer treatments without health insurance." This man is free of those kinds of concerns. He is free to pursue the more esoteric and abstract concerns of the life to come and of God. He is

secure in his own special privileged place of blessedness as one of God's chosen people.

What I think is odd in our culture is that somehow, the principalities and powers of this world have made a pact with much of the Christian Church that claims to bear the name of Jesus. And what we have in America is a rich Christian Church largely obsessed by this rich young ruler's question about "eternal life," wrongly interpreted as the life to come after death. For many, this question of "eternal life" is simply and starkly framed by the question, "If you were to die today, would you go to heaven or hell?" Somehow the mission and purpose of so many churches has been boiled down to that question. So much so that many churches wouldn't know what to do with themselves if they weren't trying to answer that question and get others to answer that question too.

Frankly, it is a question of the rich...of our rich, consumer driven, privileged Christian Church -- consumer driven in the sense that you are acquiring your fire insurance in the life to come...You are getting your ticket to ride! It is a question that largely sidetracks any concern for the poor, the hungry, the sick, and the costs of war. How else can you explain the American Christian Church's immense support for the war in Iraq when it began and its strong opposition to health care reform?

And what is most odd is that many of the poorest of the poor in America have somehow bought into this question of "eternal life" as the be all and end of God's concern, concerned more about going to heaven when they die, than about the state of their lives, and that of their neighbors, here on earth. And not just sidetracked about assuring their place in a heaven to come, but also sidetracked on fighting abortion and homosexuality and immigration as the sure threat to the free exercise of Christianity everywhere and our privileged status as Americans. And so, many Christians have made their pact with the powers and principalities of this world, and the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, and access to health care continues to head into the abyss with fewer and fewer having access to the system, and war and violence and guns continuing to be the preferred, albeit unsuccessful, way to peace.

But I have digressed.

When it comes to this story of the rich young ruler, it seems that we either think it is all about money, or we talk and act as if it has nothing to do with money. But the way I see it, it is a story about money! And my best advice is don't try to water it down or avoid it. But I would also say that this story is also not only about money.

I came across a sermon that Barbara Brown Taylor wrote on this text. She said if this story were only about money then

We could all buy our ways into heaven by cashing in our chips right now and you know that is not so. None of us earns eternal life, no matter what we do. We can keep the commandments until we are blue in the face; we can sign our paychecks over the Mother Teresa and rattle tin cups for our supper without earning a place at God's banquet table. The kingdom of God is not for sale. The poor cannot buy it with their poverty any more than the rich can buy it with their riches. The kingdom of God is God's consummate gift, to be given to whomever God pleases, for whatever reasons please God.

The catch is, you have got to be free to receive the gift. You cannot be otherwise engaged. You cannot be tied up right now, or too tied down to respond. You cannot accept God's gift if you have no spare hands to take it with. You cannot make room for it if all your rooms are already full. You cannot follow if you are not free to go.

That is why the rich young ruler went away sorrowful, if you ask me; he understood all at once that he was not free. His wealth was supposed to make him free, but kneeling in front of Jesus he understood that it was not so. Invited to follow, he went away sorrowful

instead, for he had great possessions that he lugged behind him like a ball and chain. He is the only person in the whole gospel of Mark who walks away from an invitation to follow; he is the only wounded one who declines to be healed. Poverty scared him more than bondage. He could not believe that the opposite of rich might not be poor, but free.

“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!’ They were amazed at his words, positively astonished by them, Mark says. He was challenging the social order, turning it upside down. Those who rode through the gates of Jerusalem on golden litters would find their handlebars stuck on the gates of God’s kingdom. But so would everyone else who could not leave things behind.

I do not know why the disciples were so amazed, frankly. Two of them had left their fishing nets behind, two more of them a fishing boat (not to mention their father). Another one left a lucrative career, pushing his chair away from his tax collector’s desk to follow the strange man with the burning eyes. All of them had walked away from something, but not because it was a prerequisite for becoming a disciple. It was more like a consequence, really. He called, they followed, and stuff got left behind. Not because it was bad, but because it was in the way. Not because they had to, but because they wanted to. He called, and nothing else seemed all that important anymore. Jesus was so much more real to them than anything else in their lives that it was no big heroic thing to follow him. He set them free, that is all. It was not their achievement. It was his gift.

I know, I know. The children, the mortgage, the aging parents, the doctor’s bills, the economy, the future. I know. It’s the same for me. There are days when threading a camel seems easier than following Jesus. So who can be saved? And who is brave enough to be free? The question has not changed much, but neither has the answer: for us it is impossible, but not for God. For God, all things are possible.

(Barbara Brown Taylor, “*The Opposite of Rich*” in *The Preaching Life*, pages 125-126)

As Americas we tend to define ourselves by our possessions. And we seem to have a lot of them, don’t we? Why else would we have so many self-storage units all around us? Do you ever wonder what is inside of those storage units? Are their treasured heirlooms, vast collections of things (like back issues of *Martha Steward Living* magazines or sets of fine china), or just broken and tattered things that someone doesn’t want to give up? You have got to wonder at this whole notion of “Self-storage.” Just how many “selves” are locked up in one of those units with all of those possessions?

Jesus’ conversation with the rich young ruler offers two versions of the material life. First, is the man’s life of wealth and status. This is the kind of materialism we know all too well. This is the kind of materialism we are taught to long for and trained to pursue. This is the kind of materialism marked by self-absorption.

But I think Jesus is offering another kind of materialism. The kind of materialism Jesus offers is not marked by consuming or acquiring more goods, or holding on for dear life the possessions we already have. Jesus is not calling the rich young ruler to a vague spiritualism or a Gnostic abandonment of the physical world. Instead, he is calling him to move from one kind of materialism, the self-absorbed kind, to one that focuses on others needs...on encountering others and their needs...like the poor. When Jesus says “sell all you have, give it to the poor, and come and follow me” he is inviting this rich young ruler out of his self-absorption and into the complex and messy world of the “Other.”

And there are lessons for us in this Jesus wisdom. The first lesson is the empty promise of our consumption and possession. When it comes to pursuing life in the Kingdom of God, consumption and possession are distracting, distorting, dead end streets. And the quicker we learn it, the better.

The second lesson is the hope of abundant and meaningful Eternal Life, what Paul Tillich called the Eternal Now, in the practice of engagement, a kind of materialism marked by human community where all are seen and loved and honored as God's dearly beloved.

The story of the rich young ruler begins promisingly. He's obviously searching for something. Why else would he go to Jesus? People who are satisfied and content do not seek out Jesus or any other spiritual path for that matter. What drives the pursuit of the spiritual life, of the Eternal Now, is an awareness that something is missing in *this* life and in *this* world of time and space without it.

And to add intensity and drama to the story, Mark tells us that the rich young ruler not only approaches Jesus, but *runs* to him. In asking Jesus "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" he admits that he needs something more than what he already has in his life – he wants and needs to share in the life of God.

But his encounter with Jesus leaves him stunned. What he discovers is not some path that takes us out of this world. Instead, he is confronted by a path, an invitation by Jesus, to come and follow him by a way that takes him more deeply in the cares and crisis of this world. Or, as Barbara Brown Taylor put it, "what we most have in common is not religion, but humanity." (Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pg. 102)

And in the end, Barbara Brown Taylor says that this practice of encountering others

is not designed to place you or those you love in danger, although it may help you discover how dangerous your own fear can be. The assignment is to get over yourself. The assignment is to love the God you did not make up with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and the second is like unto it: to love the neighbor you also did not make up as if that person were your own strange and particular self. Do this, and the doing will teach you everything you need to know. Do this, and you will live.

(Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, pg. 15)

Additional Resources:

Andrew Warner, "Material Things," *The Christian Century*, October 3, 2006, page 19.
Paul J. Wadell, *The Christian Century*, October 6, 2009, page 18.