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“The Key”

Job 23:1-9;16-17 Mark 10:17-31 Hebrews 4:12-16

INTRODUCTION TO JOB 23:1-9; 16-17

This morning we have a strong contrast in characters. We will hear from Job, who once was young and rich beyond measure and became old and destitute and from a man young and wealthy beyond measure-literally what Job used to be. Last week we heard about how Job lost almost everything. This week we hear his lament and wondering Why Me? Hear the word of God from Job 23:1-8; 16-17

INTRODUCTION TO MARK 10:17-31

This morning's gospel lesson is about a man who came to Jesus with some very specific questions as to how he could become a part of God's family. Specifically, he wanted to know what he needed to DO to get in on the inheritance that had eternal life as a benefit.

Unlike some of the previous encounters Jesus had with others, this man didn't come to trap Jesus. He came out of genuine concern for his own eternal life. He came asking for himself. He came looking for the key to eternal life and HE was the one who wound up being trapped. Hear the word of the Lord from the gospel from Mark 10:17-31.

Let's pray. Dear Lord, Thank you for this, your word. Open our eyes to see, our minds to understand, our hearts to receive your word. Open my lips to share what you have given to me and prepare us all to be changed so that we may respond to your word through the power of your Holy Spirit. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Since we read about Satan coming against Job last week I want to share another story about when Satan was on the prowl looking to attack a Christian. When he saw the Christian he shot one of his fiery darts and it struck the Christian in the chest. The Christian had on the breastplate of righteousness so he wasn't harmed. The devil shot at the Christian's head but that was protected by the helmet of salvation. The devil figured everyone has an Achilles' heel, so he shot at the Christian's feet that were shod with the gospel of peace so no harm was done. The Christian smirked and turned around to walk away. The devil fired an arrow into the Christian's wallet and killed him. 1

As I had pointed out before, there is no armor for the backside. So if you turn your back on Satan put your wallet in your front pocket. Better yet, as James instructed us, resist and stand against Satan and he will flee from you.

Traditionally we call this the story of the Rich Young Ruler. Mark's gospel doesn't say he was young or a ruler. Matthew and Luke record a very similar encounter that has the same exchange of questions and answers so I think it's

safe to assume it's the same person. Matthew 19:16-22 –says this man was young and that he had many possessions. Luke 18:18 says the man was a ruler who had great wealth. Mark just says he was a man who had great wealth.

This young man is one of those unique characters from the Bible that have come to represent greed. He was the ancient version of Gordon Gecko played by Michael Douglas in the movie Wall Street who famously said, "Greed is good." Now Michael Douglas plays the inventor of the technology to develop Ant Man.

So unwilling was our gospel's man to part with earthly wealth that he sold his soul in order to keep his earthly riches. He wanted to be saved but not at the expense of losing his possessions. Yet there are some things about him that are impressive.

The first thing that impresses me when I read this story is how close the man was to the Kingdom. He asked all the right questions. He understood the Law and he understood Jesus' teaching. I'm impressed with the fact that, having talked with him only a few minutes, Mark tells us that Jesus looked upon him and loved him. What was it in him that made Jesus look on him with love?

Another thing that impresses me about him is that was courageous. Luke describes him as a ruler. That is, he belonged to the upper class. (Today we might classify him as part of the 1%) It is this group which brought the most criticism against Jesus. Perhaps it was his youth or maybe it was his willingness to learn but he did not let his social position keep him from Jesus. You may remember that Nicodemus was another rich man who went to see Jesus, but he came to Jesus at night. Nicodemus went to see Jesus for much the same reason and the man in today's passage, but Nicodemus did not want to be seen consorting with Jesus. This was not the case with this man. He did not come skulking in the night. He came to Christ in broad daylight.

Another positive thing about this man is that he was humble. Let us admit that far too often in the church we are not humble. We spend time on issues that don't amount to a hill of beans while avoiding the eternal questions of life. Far too often our motivation is not sincerity but recognition and advancement of our agenda.

If indeed this was a young man it is especially hard to find young people that are humble. They think they can do anything and that they know everything. But this young man recognized that he didn't know everything. He wanted to know what he had to DO to inherit eternal life.

In that culture it was difficult for young men to have earned a lot of money. Chances are he had inherited some of the riches he had. But this man wanted to inherit something more valuable than money. He wanted to inherit eternal life. So when he saw Jesus coming he took off running. Mark says, he "ran up to him."

In those days, the elite did not run. It was considered undignified. But this young man ran up to Jesus and knelt before him, in the middle of the road in broad daylight for all to see. If his friends saw him, those within his social class there would be no end to the ridicule, but he didn't care.

How refreshing then to see someone who came in genuine sincerity. He did not come to Jesus with verbal puzzles, mental gymnastics, or pious theological jargon. He didn't ask Jesus to give an opinion on some controversial issue like other rulers or members of the religious establishment. The Pharisees came to Jesus and asked, "Jesus, what do you think about paying taxes to Caesar? Jesus, what do you think about divorce? Jesus what do you think about an afterlife? Jesus, Why don't your disciples fast or wash their hands the right way or observe the Sabbath like we do?"

Another positive thing is about this man was that he was religious. He was a spiritual man deeply concerned with religious things. When Jesus instructed him to keep the commandments, he answered, "Teacher, all these I have kept since I was a boy." Now what did he mean? He meant that since the age of 13, the point at which a Jewish boy assumes personal responsibility for keeping the commandments, he had kept the commandments.

Is that possible? Don't we as Christians assume that no one has ever kept the commandments? Moses broke all ten at once...(when he threw down the stone tablets at the sight of the Israelites dancing in front of a golden calf. ☺) He broke them and had to go back up the mountain for a second set.

Herein lies the key to this passage of Scripture and the turning point of this young man's life. This is the point at which the negatives start popping up.

The first negative thing is that this young ruler who was rich was looking for a rule. He was a ruler looking for a RULE to keep in order to please God. Look at what he says. "What must I DO to receive eternal life?" What must I DO? It is a pretty telling word, this DO. What rule must I keep in order for God to be pleased with me?

Jesus answered him with, "You know the rules." And Jesus started naming a few of them, namely the six that have to do with our relationships with one another--do not murder, do not commit adultery, and do not steal, do not accuse anyone falsely, do not cheat, respect your father and mother.

The man stopped Jesus' listing by saying, "Since I was young I have kept all these."

Now I don't know if the man was impatient, or if he unconsciously or purposely stopped Jesus before he got to the top of the list, you know, the ones that have

to do with our relationship with God—you know, the ones about having no other gods before God, you know. . . like . . . riches....

It is interesting that Jesus, after being pressed by this rich young man, actually does give him something to do. Jesus says, “You want something to do? All right. Since you have great wealth, sell all that you have, give it to the poor, and come follow me.”

The final negative thing about this rich young ruler is that he walked away. He could not reshape his priorities. To love God and love your neighbor in such a sacrificial and self-effacing way was beyond him. I think he knew all along what was missing. He knew where his heart was. He did not want to give up his life style. He was not ready to part with his wealth. So he walked away.

I would have been tempted to call after him, OK. How about a tithe? How about selling 10% of what you own and give it to the poor?

Joan Gray, a former moderator of our denomination wrote an article in the Presbyterian News extolling the virtues of tithing and she testified as to her practice with her husband of tithing since the early days of their marriage when it was hard to find two nickels to rub together. She wrote,

“As I write this, I am aware that many of our congregations are in the midst of stewardship season. In this context, I would like to lift up the antique spiritual discipline of tithing.

I say antique because statistics tell us that the average giving of Presbyterians to the church is around 2% of income nationwide. This discipline, which was so ingrained in our parents and grandparents, seems in today’s church to have gone the way of the dodo bird.” 2

The man who was young and courageous and religious and humble walked away because he was rich. And Jesus let him.

Jesus offers us a call, not a bill. Jesus doesn’t submit a bill for services rendered. He issues a call. It is a call to support God’s family. It is a call to grow God’s family. It’s a call to not only give 10% it is a call to do our part to reach our goal of 100 for our 100th! It is different for each of us. Jesus calls us to follow him whether we’re rich, young rulers or poor, old peons. Depending on what stands in the way between us and him, he may call on us to give up our riches, or he may call us to give up something more than our riches. He may call us to give up our grudges, our resentments, our prejudices, our wounded-ness, our self-serve righteousness, our love of our team, our pet peeves, our addictions, our workaholicism, our attachment to our musical taste, or our favorite way to worship. He may even call us to give up the way we’ve always done it before.

We too can choose to walk away, and Jesus may choose to let us. We can also choose to follow. That's the best choice. But even those who walk away can come back. It's always possible to come back. Remember, Jesus looked at this young leader with love. We don't know what happened after that day. We don't know what happened after the rich young ruler slept on Jesus' challenge. We don't know if he had sold everything and given it to the poor what God would have provided in its stead. Like many of Jesus parables we are left hanging. We are left questioning what WE are called to do.

Like the story of Job who had so much and lost it. Job said, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." Job lost almost all and yet in the end, almost all of what was lost was restored.

Jesus however followed the actual encounter with a real person to with a parable of sorts. It was a hyperbole. He said, "How hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. It's easier for a camel to be threaded through a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven."

Some have tried to make this parable not so striking by talking about a gate in the walls of Jerusalem called the eye of the needle. If a camel got on its knees and took off all its bags and saddle it could crawl through the small gate. But if that's what Jesus was describing why would his disciples reply "Then who can make it?" Jesus said, "With us it is impossible, but with God all things are possible!" (just wet the tail, take good aim and puuuulllllll!)

There once was another young man who was just as confused as the young man in today's passage. He had no peace in his life. He was a Roman Catholic monk who wanted to please God but he felt like an awful sinner. On a trip to Rome he encountered the church's practice of selling indulgences--the belief that financial contributions to the church could release loved ones from purgatory. He paid the fee to climb Pilate's stairs—the supposed staircase that Jesus climbed the day He was sentenced to death. There were 28 steps. You were to crawl on your hands and knees up all 28, stop on each step and say the Pater Noster—the Lord's Prayer—on each. Luther kissed each step for good measure. At the 28th step the loved one you named was released from purgatory. When Luther got to the top of the steps he said, "Who knows whether it is so?"

That young man's name was Martin Luther. He doubted the effectiveness of such an action and his conscience still bothered him. He was like our rich young ruler. He had kept the commandments since childhood but he still felt like he was doing something wrong.

Author Max Lucado once put it this way in envisioning what Jesus might have been saying to this young man: "What you want costs far more than what you can pay. You don't need a system, you need a Savior. You don't need a resume, you need a Redeemer . . . God does not save us because of what we've done.

Only a puny god could be bought with tithes. Only an egotistical god would be impressed with our pain. Only a temperamental god could be satisfied by sacrifices. Only a heartless god would sell salvation to the highest bidders. And only a great God does for his children what they can't do for themselves." This man's wealth could not buy him a place at the table of God. But the banquet was already spread. All he had to do was take and eat. 3

Paul said "the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil." 1Tim. 6:10. In verses 17-18 he also explained how the rich should approach their blessings. "As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share.

Jesus said, "Seek First the kingdom of God and his righteousness and everything else will fall into place." If we follow his advice we will be blessed even IF we aren't rich, young or a ruler. If we follow his rule we may wind up with lighter pockets but we will be those who seek and put God's kingdom first and in our search for eternal life we will have found ... the key.

Let's pray.

God of all ages and stages and of every generation, whose wisdom extends beyond the horizon and whose care reaches the farthest depths of the sea, we give thanks that we abide in the shelter of your encompassing love. We hear how nothing, not even death itself can separate us from resting eternally in your presence. We give thanks for Jesus, for his sacrifice on our behalf and how he rose victorious from the fetters of our bondage and now prepares a place for us by your side.

We pray, O God that you will remove from us any obstacles that keep us from realizing our destiny. Remove the scales from our eyes so that we can see clearly what you would have us do. Help us to put our trust in Christ who alone can keep us from falling by the wayside of self deception, avarice, false pride, greed boredom. Let our faltering steps be strengthened by his willingness to suffer defeat on our behalf so that we can walk boldly in his name.

Dear Lord, cleanse us of whatever foolishness causes us daily to betray our devotion to you. When we would serve you or others only at our convenience, startle us with your call to sacrifice what we have. When we would betray him before others by our unwillingness publicly to proclaim him our savior send your Spirit among us to renew our commitment. Hear us now as we raise our concerns to you.

1. Beth Quick, Mission: Impossible
2. Joan Gray, Sailboat Church
3. Max Lucado quoted by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com