

## Wesley United Methodist Church

October 14, 2018

“A Teachable Moment.”

Mark 10:17-31

In 1993, former president Jimmy Carter presented the commencement address to the graduating class at Rice University in Houston, Texas. He shared the story of a young college freshman who overslept for the final exam in geometry and pleaded for mercy from his professor. The professor granted it- sort of. “If you provide an accurate answer for one question, I will submit a passing grade for you.” Without much choice, the student agreed. Here is the question: “If I give you a barometer, how can you use it to determine the height of this building?”

The student smiled, and then he began, “Well there are several ways. I could tie the barometer to a rope, lower it from the roof to the ground, and measure the length of the rope. Or I could drop the barometer, time its fall, and multiply that time by 32 feet per second. Or I could find the building superintendent and say, ‘If you tell me the height of this building, I’ll give you this cool barometer.’ Or, if you want the conventional method, I could measure the barometric pressure at the base of the building, and again on the roof, and subtract the difference, thereby determining the building’s height.” The student passed.

The gospel text before us today offers us a similar problem of a final exam. A young man approaches Jesus and asks him the essential question of life. “Master, what must I do to gain eternal life?” What’s the standard? What will be on the final exam? It was not a trick question, as was so often the case when religious people spoke to Jesus. The man was quite sincere in his effort to know what God required.

Jesus’ initial response was a rather common answer, if you will. “You know the commandments; don’t commit murder, don’t commit adultery, don’t steal, don’t cheat, respect your parents.” And while the young man’s answer may sound like bragging, it is clear that his pursuit is genuine. “Teacher, ever since I was a child, I have obeyed all the commandments. So, what else?” And I love the way the gospel of Luke tells the story:

“Jesus looked straight at the man with love and said, ‘You need only one thing. Go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; then come follow me.’” And Luke concludes this way; “And the man went away very sad because he was rich.” But the teachable moment is not over; Jesus turns to his disciples and tells them “How hard is it to enter the kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

“Then who can do it?” the disciples wondered. “Humanly speaking,” Jesus answered, “it is impossible. But with God, all things are possible.”

Let’s look at this again: The young man wants to gain God’s approval and go to heaven, but how can he be certain? Follow the commandments. Been there, done that, he tells Jesus. Okay, here’s something you haven’t done: Give away your wealth. And the rich man blinked! And failed.

All his life, he had been taught to believe that the way to the kingdom is through good works. But somehow the young man assumed that there must be something else; why otherwise would he have asked this question of Jesus? “I’ve done all the things required by the law, but is there something else, Jesus?” Jesus looked into the man’s heart and saw that he loved his wealth more than all else, and that became the one thing necessary. No amount of good works, kind deeds, or passionate prayers could accomplish this; the man must choose between his wealth and his eternity. And he made his choice.

Friends, we have met the rich young man and he is us! We make choices in our lives every day as to how we will live our lives, and there is a consistency in our choices. Some of us regularly choose to protect our wealth, others make choices to guard our popularity, and for others, it is a choice involving our social status, our academic achievements, our physical appearance. If we take inventory of our lives, each of us would likely find that “one thing” of which Jesus spoke. And if we take that command at face value, it becomes for us a crossroads in our lives. Jesus looks at us in love and says, “Give up your earthly riches and you will have riches in heaven.”

But here’s the loophole: The man was asking Jesus what he could *do* to gain eternal life, so Jesus gave him the answer. “If you want to *do* something, here’s what you can *do*. But there is another way!” The whole of scripture tells us that we do not gain the kingdom by what we do, but rather, by what Christ has done. His grace is sufficient. The work Jesus did on the cross brings forgiveness; the promise of the empty tomb is resurrection. It’s ours by faith...not by works.

And then what seems to be a footnote of Jesus’ conversation with the man is actually the explanation of his dilemma.

What is the lesson Jesus taught his disciples? “It is easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into heaven.”

“That’s impossible!” the disciples claimed. “Not for God!” And that’s the nugget of the story. That what is impossible for us to do, God has already done.

That what was a hopeless situation for the rich young man was solved by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

In a sense, our lives are not so different from this first-century Jew.

We want it all. We want our things, we want peace, we want love, joy, freedom, and of course, we want the promise of eternal life. Personally, I think this “you can have it all” Theology is nonsense, but most of us are smitten with it.

How can we live our lives with this craziness? Let me propose a beginning point, trust that it will cause each of us to examine the priorities of our lives.

The kingdom of heaven is ours—period—end of story. If we believe that Jesus is Savior, then that test has been graded and we all got an “A.” How shall we then live our lives? If the most important question of our existence has been decided, why do we fret over stuff, or earthly power, or petty differences?

I understand why; if we think this might be all there is, we should grab for all the prizes we can. But if the ultimate prize is already ours, I wonder why the things of this world are so important. And please, don’t think I am boasting about the selfless life I am living, because I am not.

I do believe, with the apostle Paul, that whatever I miss out or give up or lose in this life is useless compared to the riches of knowing Jesus Christ and of knowing that our eternity with God is secure. Perhaps that confidence will allow us to free up our grip on the things that we guard so carefully in this life. The Savior loves you, he’s claimed you for eternity, and now you are free to live. Thanks be to God. Amen.