

Sermon
Sunday, Oct. 14, 2018
Mark 10:17-31
Preacher: David Martin
Where's My Checklist?

After hearing today's Gospel lesson, I have one very important question:

"Now Jesus, what *exactly* am I supposed to do?"

Today's lesson from Mark is a very complicated reading with a lot of layers. I could stand up here and spend an hour just talking about the historical context and theological interpretations of this passage. There's a lot to take in. There's a lot to digest. There's a heck of a lot going on.

So, "Jesus, what exactly am I supposed to do?"

Today's gospel begins with a man asking Jesus how to inherit eternal life - how to get into heaven when he dies. First Jesus reminds the man of some of the Ten Commandments. Oddly, Jesus only brings up the interpersonal commandments and not those which relate the God. The man assures Jesus he has always obeyed the commandments.

So, Jesus, what exactly am I supposed to do? Obey the commandments. OK. That's straight forward enough. I may have some trouble from time to time. But that's clear enough and I'll do my best. I think I can handle it.

Then Jesus tells that guy to sell everything he owns, give the money to the poor, and follow him. The man's response is to walk away, grieving because he had many possessions.

I'm going to take a step back and say this story has the reputation of being about a young, rich man. That is because the same story appears in two other gospels. In Matthew he is described as young. In Luke, he is described as rich. But if you re-read your scripture insert, the passage today never tells us he is young nor does it say he is rich. We might assume he is rich because he has many possessions.

So back to me asking Jesus exactly what I'm supposed to do. Before I really studied today's lesson, I would have said it doesn't apply to me. I'm not rich. But Jesus didn't say "If you're rich, sell all your possessions and follow me." All we know is that the man in the story had many possessions. You know what, I've got a lot of possessions. I've got so many possessions I'm not even sure what all I've got.

So, does Jesus really want me to sell everything I have, give the proceeds to the poor and follow him? I'm beginning to feel like that dude in the story.

Or maybe Jesus is just speaking metaphorically. Perhaps Jesus wants us to unburden ourselves from the things which keep us from God. I don't think my house full of stuff is really keeping me from God. Is it?

Again, Jesus didn't say just sell those possessions which keep you from God. Jesus didn't say get rid of the non-material habits which keep you from discovering God and following Jesus.

“Sell what you own, give your money to the poor, and follow me.” Is that really what you want me to do Jesus? I mean, listen, I’m sure I can follow you while still keeping the majority of my stuff. Maybe there is more coming up that can help me out.

As the gospel continues, we hear the disciples are “perplexed” and “greatly astounded” when he tells them it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. NOW we hear the word “rich” entering the conversation. The disciples are confused because in the Jewish tradition being rich meant you had been blessed by God. Now they are hearing that being rich is a detriment to getting into heaven! It seems the rules are changing.

So, Jesus. You want me to get rid of everything I own. That’s sounds rally hard.

The disciples are thinking the same thing I’m thinking. How is it possible for anyone to get into heaven if there is this incredibly rigorous standard?

Jesus tells them it is indeed impossible for humans. But for God, anything is possible.

So, let me get this right. One of the criteria for getting into heaven is to get rid of everything I own. But you know that’s impossible. In fact, only through God’s grace can we get into heaven. That’s confusing at best, and downright unfair at worst.

So, Jesus, what exactly is it I’m supposed to do?

I’m glad Peter speaks up at this point in today’s story. We can always count on Peter to be on our side – and to probably put his foot in his mouth. Let’s face it: Peter wants to be faithful but he’s kind of a dope.

Peter helpfully points out the he and the other disciples HAVE given up their entire lives to follow Jesus. The implication is that Peter believes they are shoe-ins to make it to heaven.

Jesus assures the disciples that everyone who has sacrificed so much for his ministry will indeed be returned all they’ve given up 100 times over. What Jesus is saying is that if someone gives up their family to follow him, they will receive so many more family members by joining this new community.

But not only will they receive the things they’ve given up 100 times over – they will also receive persecutions that many times. It was hard being a Christian in those early days.

At least Peter is relieved to hear that his sacrifice will have some good return. Surely, he is on the guest list for heaven.

But Jesus has to add one last kicker to the end. Don’t be so confident, Peter. Many who are first will be last – and the last will be first.

Say what? So now we learn that even if we do everything right just as Jesus instructed and then realize that only by God’s grace are we saved – it’s nothing we do ourselves which saves us – even then we may be pushed to the back of the line because, well, Jesus doesn’t give us any reason. That’s just the way it’s going to be.

So, again, Jesus, I’m confused. Exactly what am I supposed to be doing?

As humans, we want to know the steps required to attain a goal. Just like the man in this story, we want to know exactly what we need to do to inherit eternal life. How do we get into the kingdom of God? Tell me the steps. I'll make a checklist. And the problem will be solved.

So, once again, Jesus. Exactly what am I supposed to be doing?

It almost feels like we've been painted into a corner here. Maybe I've painted us into a corner.

But there is one little phrase in this story that is almost always overlooked. Right before Jesus utters the fateful directive to sell everything he owns, Jesus looks at the man....and loves him.

The passage reads "Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said "You lack one thing..."

Before anything else, Jesus loved him. Before anything else Jesus loves us.

I also find great comfort in Jesus saying "for God, all things are possible."

My friends, I have struggled with this reading all week trying to bring the good news to you from a story that seems pretty dire at times. But let's remember that Jesus loves us and for God, all things are possible.

So, when I ask - when WE - ask Jesus exactly what we're supposed to be doing after reading this gospel scripture, I think the answer is: we are supposed to trust that Jesus loves us and for God, all things are possible.

That's what we are supposed to be doing.

Jesus wants us to keep being the best person we can possibly be. Let's work on getting rid of so many things we hang on to. Let's do our best to rid ourselves of unnecessary possessions that take our time in unproductive ways. Let's do our best to throw away bad habits and time wastes (social media) that keep us from the things Jesus calls us to do.

I realize this is not the same as selling everything you own. But it is a step in the right direction. Our Christian journey will take some time. We can keep working on downsizing - and stop obtaining more stuff.

It's difficult even with some relaxed restrictions. I know. We are so tied up in all our stuff and all our own ideas.

Jesus, EXACTLY what am I supposed to do?

How do we get into the kingdom of God?

I believe we get into the kingdom of God by building it here on earth. We build the kingdom of God by loving our neighbors and by loving ourselves. We build the kingdom of God by feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, visiting the prisoner, helping the sick.

Stop trying to thread that camel through a needle and look around. Don't worry about what you need to do to get into heaven. Instead, build the kingdom of God right here by helping those around you right here on earth. I believe that is exactly what Jesus wants us to do.

It's a tall order. And, frankly, it may be more difficult than selling everything you own.

But haven't you heard? Jesus loves you.

Didn't you know? For God, all things are possible.