

Sermon

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St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Albuquerque, NM

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Mark 10:17-31

Seriously

Is Jesus serious? Really? Can Jesus really be serious? Were you just listening to that story? Did you really hear the Gospel I just read?

A person asks Jesus what they must do to inherit eternal life – to get into heaven. Jesus responds with the obligatory “Follow the commandments”. But then Jesus drops a bombshell. Jesus tells them to sell everything they own, give the money to the poor AND then to follow him – leave everything you’ve got behind and follow Jesus!

After hearing this shocking news, the person leaves. We are told they are grieving because they have many possessions.

Sell everything you own. Give the money to the poor. Follow Jesus.

Is Jesus serious?

And my friends, this isn't just a one-off story which has a tiny reference in the Gospel of Mark. This story appears in all three synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke with very little difference from gospel to gospel.

In Matthew (*Matthew 19: 16-22*) we are told the person is young.

In Luke (*Luke 18:18-23*) the person is a ruler, and we are told they are rich.

In the reading today from Mark (*Mark 10:17-31*) no adjectives describe this person. We only hear they have a lot of possessions. Perhaps we are assigned this story from the Gospel of Mark because this person is an Average Joe or Average Josephine. You. Me.

Sell everything you own. Give the money to the poor. Follow Jesus.

Is Jesus serious?

I started today's sermon by asking that question: is Jesus serious? Does he really mean that if we want to follow him, we must sell everything we own and give the money to the poor?

Good news! According to many scholars, the answer is no. Jesus, who spoke the Aramaic language, was using what is called Aramaic hyperbole to make a point.

Whew! Thank goodness for Aramaic hyperbole! Let's explore it, although I am skeptical of its pertinence to our understanding of today's Gospel.

Edward F. Markquart (yes, that's his real name), the pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in Seattle writes about today's Gospel lesson:

"It is important that we understand this passage but not take it literally. It is part of Aramaic hyperbole, overstatement or exaggeration in order to make a point. You don't take these words literally or you get in trouble. Other examples of Aramaic hyperbole are "anyone who does not hate your mother and father and brother and sister cannot be my disciple." Or, "if you hand sins, cut it off. If your eye sins, cut it out. If your foot leads you astray, cut it off." These are all illustrations from the gospels where Jesus used Aramaic exaggeration to make a point. This is common in Eastern languages."

In his book "The Words of Jesus in Original Aramaic", Stephen Andrew Missik writes, "Jesus often used hyperbole. This is inflating things to an extreme for example. This is an illustration of exaggerating a truth. Jesus is using an extreme example to make sure people are listening and understand his point."

Well, I don't know about you, but this makes it seem we're off the hook.

Markquart concludes his dissection of this passage by writing: "Jesus' message is: we are to *generously* share our economic resources with the poor and hungry of the world. "

And, to that, I say "WOW!" Isn't this an interesting Gospel lesson for the second of three Sundays when we, as a faith community, are discerning how we are going to support the work of St. Mark's with our financial commitments. Well, then listen to Edward Markquart, my friends, and give generously.

But I am troubled by this explanation about Aramaic hyperbole (however comforting it may sound). If we are to believe Jesus was only using extreme exaggeration to make a point in this case.... that he didn't really expect the person asking him for advice on how to get into heaven to sell everything.... then was Jesus always exaggerating for dramatic effect?

When one of the scribes asked Jesus which was the first commandment, Jesus replied it was to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength." But did Jesus really mean there was a second commandment of "You shall love your neighbor as yourself?" And the tag line "There is no other commandment greater than these." (*Mark 12:28-34*) Was he exaggerating?

If so, was Jesus also using hyperbole when he said the exact same thing to the lawyer who asked how to inherit eternal life? Jesus told that lawyer to "love your neighbor as yourself." When questioned about who his neighbor was, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan. (*Luke 10:25-37*) Was that just an extreme example to illustrate a point?

Did Jesus REALLY mean we have to love our neighbor as ourselves? Or was that just big words to encourage us to not be mean to some people some of the time?

Was Jesus serious in the 25th chapter of Matthew when he told his followers to give food to the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, take care of the sick, and visit those in prison...because if you do that for any one, you're doing it for him? (*Matthew 25:25-26*) Did Jesus mean that or was it just an extreme example used to say "you should be nice to people if you get a chance"?

And here's a whopper! Did Jesus really mean it when he said, "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"? (*Matthew 5:44*) Because I've got to tell you... the likelihood that I can easily do that, ranks right up there with selling everything I own and giving the money to the poor.

Where do we draw the line? Where does this "Aramaic hyperbole" end and where do Jesus' actual commands begin?

In current terms, which passages have loopholes, and which are ironclad? When Jesus tells us something, how do we know if he means it or if he's just being dramatic to get our attention?

Here is what I'm going to propose today. Although I believe "Aramaic hyperbole" is definitely a "thing." I suggest we are not intended to hear the words Jesus says with an ear for exaggeration.

May I suggest Jesus IS serious. He means what he says. Because he is always challenging us.

There is one thing in Mark's account of this story which does not appear in the other Gospels of Matthew and Luke

Before Jesus drops the bad news about selling everything they own.... **we hear that "Jesus loved" the person who has come before him.** Before everything else, Jesus loved this person who had an honest question for him.

Jesus loved them. Jesus loves us. Jesus knows we are human. And because we are human, Jesus knows we will fail. But because Jesus loves us, he challenges us. He's giving us every opportunity to grow to be the best person we can be – to be more Christ-like with every single action we take.

Jesus knows for a fact we are not going to be able to LOVE our enemies. But Jesus wants us to strive to get closer to that goal.

To love our neighbors as ourselves we must, first and foremost, actually love and accept ourselves as the beautiful creation God has made us. And then we must incrementally find new ways to let everyone else know we love them, too.

Jesus knows it would be impossible and impractical for us to sell everything we own and give the proceeds to the poor. But Jesus wants to push us to see how close we can get.

Stop buying a coffee from an expensive coffee shop each day.

Stop purchasing more shoes than you could ever possibly wear.

Sell that collection of “whatever it is” you collect but never use or enjoy.

Work towards ending an addiction that takes so much of your money.

And then don't save the money for a rainy day, nor as a reward for your virtue. Give that money away.

That is the challenge Jesus gives to us today. Sell everything – or, rather, work towards selling the things you don't need and don't use – get rid of the things that weigh you down and take your time and attention away from God instead of drawing closer to God – stop purchasing things you don't need – stop retail therapy - and give that money away.

The mistake the person in today's Gospel made is that they just walk away. They leave. They can't even imagine the challenge Jesus has put forward. This person gives up.

We, as a faith community of St. Mark's, are not quitters. Look at this beautiful place of worship filled with faithful dedicated people! Think about the people at home here in Albuquerque and other cities across the country who have virtually joined us today. We have survived a devastating theological split. We are surviving the ravages of a pandemic, isolation, and not being able to meet in person for a year – and we are flourishing. We are certainly up to the challenge of building the kingdom of God right here on earth.

And I know we are up to the challenge Jesus puts before us today.

I'm serious.

Are you?