

TEXT: Mark 10:17-31

The Good Grief of Giving

Good Grief. This guy lacked something? Really? It sure seems he led an exemplary life. He obeyed the commandments from his youth, for crying out loud – not even any adolescent rebellion. He followed the rules, he stayed in the lines, he took the high moral road instead of shortcuts. He's your cradle roll church goer, your elder, your deacon, your elder and deacon. He serves on committees and at Emmanuel Dining Room. He's taught Sunday School, baked for funeral receptions and fixed things around the place. He's a good neighbor, a good citizen. He honored his mother and father, for heaven's sake. The world, the church, could use more of this guy, right? He not only had the qualifications, but he showed the right attitude – humility – as he ran and knelt before Jesus, asking "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He sure looked like the perfect applicant. He'd checked all the right boxes.

"One thing you lack", said Jesus. One thing? Good grief. One thing is going to trip him up? Isn't Jesus raising the bar here? When he called other people to follow him, he didn't set conditions – just "follow me". And besides, isn't the point that we aren't having to – aren't able to – prove ourselves, earn our way into eternal life? To the man's question – isn't that how inheritance works? That we do nothing ourselves to earn or achieve it – we are just blessed to receive it?

"One thing you lack", says Jesus, looking at this man with love – not judgment. Jesus wasn't closing the door on him, he was opening it. The man could see in, and see what Jesus was offering on the other side of that door. He just had to cross the threshold – admittedly a

threshold the size of a hurdle. Or maybe the Great Wall of China. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” Good grief. And the truth is, that we don’t know what he did – although plenty of people assume. Quick poll – how many of you think the man took Jesus up on his offer? How many think he didn’t, he couldn’t?

The story isn’t finished in the scripture text. All we know is that, hearing this, the man’s face fell. And he went away grieving, because he had great wealth. The wind was taken out of this perfect applicant sails. He grieved because he understood that giving is giving up. And we who assumed he didn’t take Jesus up on the offer, that he couldn’t let go of his stuff –we get it too. Giving is giving up, letting go, losing something – and there is grief with that.

Jesus certainly understood it. “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God”. To which his disciples say “Good grief – if not them, then who?” They, and those who inherited the faith of God’s people from generations before, understood that riches were a sign of God’s blessing and favor. And that twisted theology echoes on still, if we’re honest. Jesus counters that, with an image so extreme, that people have tried to tame it, to water it down to make it easier to swallow. The word for camel is just a couple of letters off from the word for rope, so maybe it was really “it’s easier for a rope to go through the eye of a needle...” Or the needle’s eye was a kind of gate in some city walls, a gate so low that a camel would have to stop, be unloaded, go through on its camel knees – so “easier for a camel to go through the needle’s eye.” But even so translated and tamed, Jesus’ point is the same --- there is a greater challenge for those of us who have wealth, resources, stuff. Because, quite simply, it is hard to take hold of something – even something wonderful, faithful, life-giving – if our hands are full. Or if we’re

holding on to something else for dear life because it has become our life, our security, our identity.

And in our day and culture, money does that. Our goal from the start is to be able to support ourselves – to become, and then to stay, independent. Not to need to ask anything of anyone, rely on anyone, or be indebted to anyone. To be in control of our lives, and be able to make the choices we want to make, and know we're entitled to them. It's the American dream, right? A dream that comes in the shape of a camel, and can cost us a life of faithful discipleship.

I am not saying – nor was Jesus saying – that everyone who follows him – all who are seeking eternal life- must give away everything they have. Remember, Jesus didn't ask that of anyone else. This was a customized call – this was the “one thing” that this one man lacked. The question for us – for you, for me –is what is our camel? What is it that we hold on to too tightly? Maybe it's what we have – our financial well-being. Or maybe it's our pride – God knows it's hard for us to give that up. Or our sense of entitlement or rights. Or maybe it's our expectations of how things should be. Whatever it is that we hold on to holds us back from full reliance on God, and faithful following of Jesus. Can we give it up? Or is that where we put our trust and find our security? That's the question.

This is why giving is good for us. It loosens our grip. Yes, it is hard to let go. It feels like loss –with the grief that brings. It feels like change, to make a decision to live in a different way. What one thing do you lack? Jesus looks at us with love, and extends his hand to lead us on. Will we have a hand free to take hold and follow? Only if we are willing to let go. Only if we will allow ourselves to experience the good grief of giving. May it be so.