

## ***Entering the Reign***

Mark 10: 17-31

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In the last few lessons we've heard in the gospel according to Mark, Jesus has been healing demons and afflictions. While he's been healing, he's also been teaching that the God-powered life is revealed and unleashed for those who relentlessly love and pursue those who are suffering or alienated or forgotten, just like Christ does. The disciples repeatedly demonstrate an inability to accept Christ's invitation to a different and faith-filled life, because of their doubt, fear, self-centeredness and narrow-mindedness. In the passage preceding what we read today, Jesus says that you must enter the kingdom of God, the reign of God, as a child would – trusting.

### **Mark 10:17-31 (NRSV)**

17As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 18Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 19You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" 20He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." 21Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." 22When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

23Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" 24And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." 26They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" 27Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

28Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." 29Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, 30who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. 31But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

He ran to Jesus, and knelt before Jesus, but could not follow Jesus. Jesus was setting out on a journey, on his way out of town. The Jesus train was leaving the station, about to depart on a trip to Jerusalem, and ultimately, to new life. At this very moment, this moment of imminent departure into the rest of Mark's gospel story, something stirs an unnamed man to run to Jesus and kneel at his feet. The man is seeking, he's a pursuer of God, he's reverent, he's willing to kneel at the feet of Jesus, and he's open, he's willing to seek divine counsel for living his life.

This is a particular moment representing just about every moment like this one we're in right now, all of us at Jesus' feet in worship. Sitting in the pews, seeking, reverent, and open, at Jesus' feet, daring to ask the question, "What must I do?"

This worshipful moment, one that happens numerous times in the gospel stories, one that happens every week, is ripe for God's will to be done. A present God, about to go somewhere, a reverent and open seeker in pursuit, now on her knees at God's feet. This is an encounter that should work out well for God.

At the feet of Jesus, the man asks a question, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The man's question illustrates that this seemingly simple and promising encounter is actually quite tense. The first part,

what must I do, how can I control my destiny, what is the standard I must attain. The second part, how do I inherit eternal life? What are the requirements for inheritance? For what will you then reward me? This is the tension of this otherwise promising moment, what must I do, Lord, so that you will do what you do?

The man asked a big and intense question of Jesus, illustrative of the tension at work in a relationship between a person and a God, and got a big and intense answer. No one is good but God alone. You have received commandments to live by. So far so good, says the man, I have kept the commandments my whole life. If this man had kept the commandments his whole life, he had nothing to worry about in his tradition, he was a child of God's favor and blessing. But I'm interested in why this virtuous man who should have had nothing to worry about ran to Jesus, why he wondered what more can I do. He was unsettled by something deep, it would seem, this one who should have wanted for nothing, wanted something.

The late Arthur Ashe tells about this kind of deep stirring. Ashe was a world champion tennis player, captain of America's Davis Cup Team, who in the course of heart surgery, contracted AIDS from a blood transfusion. As his disease progressed and he was dying, he wrote a wonderful book, *Days of Grace*. After his first by-pass surgery and the decision to retire from playing tennis in 1979, Arthur Ashe experienced a sense of uneasiness and restlessness. He reflected: "How could I be dissatisfied, even subtly, with my life to that point? I had lived a fantasy of a life. But I was dissatisfied. Who knows what force gnaws at us, telling us that our accomplishments, no matter how sensational, are not enough, that we need to do more? I wanted to make a difference, however small, in the world."<sup>1</sup> The unnamed man at the feet of Jesus wanted something more, too, wanted to experience, perhaps, a life that's not just commanded, but empowered, transformed, and transforming.

At this moment of unsettledness and wanting, Jesus looks at the man, loves him (an extraordinary moment of genuine love and emotion from Jesus), and tells him he lacks one more thing – LACKING. The only thing you need is to NEED. Go, sell all you have and give to the poor, then come follow me. Jesus, it appears, recognized that there was something that had a hold on this man, something that held him back from faith and following, and told the man to do one last thing, and shake loose from that which held him back. The man demonstrates that his wealth indeed held him back from discipleship, from embracing the opportunity to be with a Jesus on the move, because this last request from Jesus was too much, he was shocked and went away grieving.

Jesus follows this encounter with teaching. How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom! How hard is it? It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Wow, that's hard. Absurdly hard. The disciples were greatly astounded at this teaching, and asked each other, "who then can be saved?" A camel can't fit through the eye of a needle, and entering the kingdom while rich is harder than that!

Some scholars suggest that Jesus' absurd analogy had another meaning for the Hebrews that can help us hear this gospel freshly, and perhaps more acutely. The battle walls of Jerusalem, the city where God lived in the temple, the city where Jesus will go to save the world, had gates through which people passed, and the gates had a low clearance, so that enemy warriors on horse or camel couldn't just race into town for a surprise attack. These city gates were known as the eyes of the needle. Camels couldn't fit through the eye of the needle without kneeling, crawling, or as someone said in bible study this week, without unloading all the gear piled on top of the camel's back. It was an awkward, laborious, and humbling crawl to get camels through the gates, and for a rich person to enter the kingdom, they are going to have to kneel, duck, humble themselves, crawl through the gates like everyone else.

The unnamed man didn't have a problem kneeling before Jesus, but he did have a problem following him. He was left, if you will, kneeling outside the city gates, with his wealth and possessions piled on his back, rendering him unable or unwilling to crawl through. The call of this text today, in this community of plenty, is a pointed question: are we willing to crawl through the gates of the City of God? The Jesus train is heading

straight for Jerusalem, straight for Calvary Hill and the cross, straight for the tomb where God's victory will be won, will we follow? Jesus is setting out on a journey, do we want to stop him and be taught, or do we want to follow him and be transformed by the divine power? This is a gospel and a savior on the move, and if you and I are happy where we are, if we're uncomfortable with moving, even awkwardly, we risk missing the divine-powered life.

This is a week, and a text, for self reflection, and for community reflection. We can each ask ourselves, what's holding us back from moving and following faithfully? But we can together, all, ask ourselves, what's holding us back as a community? Are we willing to imagine new way of being, new initiatives, as our forward reaching response to Christ's call upon our lives? We'll have an opportunity to hear in a moment about Family Promise, a program for serving homeless families and children in the north shore.<sup>2</sup> Whether it's participating in this program, or imagining other ways we can serve deserving children of God in the most difficult economy we've seen in years, are we willing to go, to crawl, to that new place?

Jesus teaches the virtuous man that radical reimagination and reformation are required in order to enter the reign of God, where rewards abound. The youth, later today, are going to share their experiences with all of us who will hear them, from their summer trip to Newport, TN. A couple of the kids and I got to hear a rather haunting invitation from the WWII veteran whose house we worked on there. Walter has been blind for the last 17 years, now legally deaf too, a former truck driver living in a trailer home with the roof falling in. In talking about their life, his wife Arlena and granddaughter Mindy present as well, Walter offered these stunning words, coming from someone who had sacrificed himself for his country, and suffered from declining health, "I guess if I had to do it all over again, I wouldn't do a single thing differently. I've been blessed, and give God the glory." I have no idea what he was talking about, but I am haunted by it, this peace and contentment, this "something else" that maybe the unnamed man in our story today was looking for. May we all be haunted by witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Ashe, *Days of Grace*. Ballantine, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> [www.familypromise.org](http://www.familypromise.org)