

The 21st Sunday after Pentecost
October 14, 2018
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Job 23:1-9, 16-17
Psalm 22:1-5, 9-11
Hebrews 4:12-16
Mark 10:17-31

“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Before we rush ahead to Jesus’ answer in this morning’s gospel, we’d do well to consider the question the man asked him first. For the topic before us is not just the evils of wealth; the topic before us is nothing less than eternal life. But what does that mean?

Frederick Buechner makes this observation about the subject:

We think of Eternal Life, if we think of it at all, as what happens when life ends.
We would do better to think of it as what happens when life begins. ⁱ

That’s a pretty important insight for us to consider. Because if Frederick Buechner is right – and I think he is – the man who runs up and kneels before Jesus isn’t asking about how to get into heaven after he dies. He’s asking about how to let “eternal life” begin in him here and now.

What’s translated for us as “eternal life” could be translated in other ways. It doesn’t translate easily. It could be translated as the “life of the eons” or “life of the ages” or “life in the messianic age.” One writer describes it as “life without limit.” We might think of it as the really real life, a really real life lived not just for today but for all of God’s days.

“Eternal life” is not the preferred term in Mark’s gospel. We hear it more in John than in the other gospels. In Mark (as in Matthew and Luke), Jesus typically speaks of the “kingdom of God.” But whether it’s “eternal life” or the “kingdom of God,” it comes to pretty much the same thing. It’s not just what happens in the bye and bye, but the abundant life God intends for us all in the here and now. It’s what Michael Curry refers to as God’s dream for us and our world.

“What do I have to do to live this kind of life, the one God intends?” That’s what the man asks. Jesus tells him what to do ... though he’s really only telling him what he already knows. The man tells Jesus that. He says he’s been doing all this all his life.

And he’s not bragging. I think that’s clear by how Jesus responds to him. Jesus looks at the man, we’re told, and he *loves* him. He doesn’t treat him as insincere. He doesn’t mock him as self-righteous. He doesn’t accuse him of being a hypocrite. He loves this guy.

But for all his sincerity and dedication, something is amiss. Whether anybody else knows it or not, he knows it. Whatever he shows the world outside, he knows he’s missing something, something important, something that matters, something that’s a matter of life and death.

So he comes to Jesus with his question, asking, in effect, "What more can I do?"

And Jesus, out of love for him, offers the cure for what ails him:

You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, then you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.

It's not really about the money – even as it really is! It's about "eternal life." Jesus offers him a way out of his old self-contained, isolated existence and into the new "eternal life." Jesus shows him how to really participate in being whole and holy in his life ... and the living of it.

The thing of it is, though, the cure will cost him everything. And that was more than he'd bargained for. That seems clear.

... he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

The man wants the new life, the abundant life. But it will cost him his old life, his manageable life. And that's too much. But this brings him no satisfaction either, only sorrow for his inability to grab hold of the best deal he's ever been offered. So he walks away, *grieving*.

And I think that as the man walks away grieving, Jesus grieves as well.

I think Jesus grieves both for this man-that-he-loves and for the world.

Jesus grieves for the man himself, first of all, because Jesus knows that clinging to his old life will not bring him the new life he seeks. And Jesus grieves for the world, because Jesus knows that a world where some few have more than they need to live, while others live in desperate need, is a far, far cry from the dream God intends. It's a "lose-lose" situation.

And Jesus grieves because he sees how hard it is for those with wealth to hear what he's telling them, how impossible it seems for them to take part in the turning of this world "from the nightmare it often is into the dream God intends." Jesus knows that this is impossibly hard for them to hear, but this *hard* news is the only *good* news he has to offer them. And us.

The man asked how to let the really real life begin in him, and Jesus not only told him, he invited him to begin living it, to live in communion with God and in solidarity with his neighbor. He could enter into a larger new family if he did ... laying claim to a treasure on earth as in heaven. It's not that it seems to him too good to be true; it's simply too hard to pursue.

Again, Frederick Buechner has something pithy and poignant to say:

Jesus says that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. Maybe the reason is not that the rich are so wicked that they're kept out of the place but that they're so out of touch with reality they can't see it's a place worth getting into. ⁱⁱ

And that's very nearly where our gospel this morning leaves us.

It doesn't seem like there's much in the way of good news in the end: the man walks away, grieving; and Jesus tells the disciples how impossible it all is.

And so the disciples ask, "Then who *can* be saved?"

And then, for the first time this morning, Jesus offers a glimmer of hope. It's not much. But it's a glimmer. And it shines.

"For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

As I imagine the man walking away, grieving, I remember another man who came to Jesus on another occasion. He, too, was dedicated. He, too, knew the commandments, and nothing was said to suggest he was insincere. Nicodemus was his name, a teacher in his own right who came to Jesus in the dead of night, calling him "rabbi" ... *teacher*.

Nicodemus was looking for something missing. The very act of his coming to Jesus was his way of asking: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

The long and the short of it, though, is that Jesus told Nicodemus he needed to be "born again" and he took it all too literally and could make no sense of what Jesus was telling him. He came looking for some enlightenment, but he was still very much in the dark when he left that night.

But that's not the end of his story. Near the very end of the gospel, after Jesus had died on a cross, Nicodemus shows up again. He comes with a mixture of myrrh and aloes to honor the good teacher. And along with Joseph of Arimathea, he helps bury the body of Jesus. You see, whatever happened that first night wasn't the end of his story.

And that makes me wonder about the man in this morning's gospel. He walked away in grief. We heard that. But we have no idea what happened to him thereafter.

Maybe he got more tight-fisted the older he got. Maybe he simply gave up trying to keep the commandments, since they never really fixed what seemed to be wrong anyhow.

Or maybe ... just maybe he went home that day but couldn't sleep that night. Maybe what was impossible for him in the light of day became impossible to ignore in the dead of night.

And maybe he even found his way back to Jesus and the good news that had once seemed so hard, the good news that Jesus loved him (and all who walked the way with him) and invited him to come along and do the same ... so maybe he finally let life begin in him. ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, "Eternal Life," in *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (HarperSanFrancisco, New York, NY, 1973), p. 22.

ⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, "Money," in *Whistling in the Dark" An ABC Theologized* (Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1988), pp. 80-81.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bonus material:

Andrew Prior offers a reflective poem (or is it some poetic reflection?) along these lines. He calls it "The Questioning."

The day breaks gray,
the light uncertain
as if unsure of its purpose,
as if making up its mind
about morning; it eases
to a window where a weary
man is leaning, wakeful, eyes
restless, scanning an inner
horizon where thoughts
that will not sleep
cluster, diverge, repeat
their incessant questioning.

The light wanders his rooms,
collects glints from the filigree,
the fine silken fabrics,
the ornaments of wealth,
but his eyes do not follow
its path. With clear memory's vision
what he sees are other eyes:
the pair that beheld him
yesterday on the road.

"One thing you lack," Jesus said,
to him who lacked for nothing.
"Sell what you own and follow me."
And there was warmth in Jesus' eyes,
there was love for him who questioned
about inheriting eternal life.
But then
such sadness in their depths
as he turned away.
Now today his thoughts, unsettled,
gray as dull daybreak,
interrogate the hollow
in his soul.

Behind him in his rooms
stretch the trophies of the years,
the gathered costly trinkets
that once so warmed his heart.
But their colours seem now cold
and today he is uncertain
about what is and is not "treasure".
And he cannot turn his face
from the window.
He cannot
turn his gaze from the road.