

Nothing Less Than All We've Got
A Sermon on Mark 10:17-31
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As [Jesus] 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?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You 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; Honour your father and mother.” ’ He said to him, ‘Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.’ Jesus, 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.’ When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It 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.’ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, ‘Then who can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’

Peter began to say to him, ‘Look, we have left everything and followed you.’ Jesus 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, who 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. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.’

It's a hard time to be a human.

We are nearing the end of an election cycle that's been full of contention. No matter which side of the ever-widening political divide you stand on, more and more seems to be on the line - our very lives, or the lives of our children are at stake. We've spent two weeks listening to a Supreme Court confirmation hearing that brought up traumatic memories of sexual assault many people had either worked through or repressed. In Georgia, voter registrations have been put on hold, potentially blocking 53,000 voters from participating in the upcoming elections - a number that is staggering in itself, but even more so when it's learned that, while Georgia is only about 1/3 African American, 70% of those 53,000 voter applications held are from Black Georgians. On October 3rd, Ciara Minaj Carter Frazier was the 22nd known trans person to have been murdered in 2018.

It's a hard time to be a human.

This week, the Trump Administration announced they are halting visas to non-married partners of diplomats to the U.S., creating potential for serious hazards at home for diplomats from countries where same-sex marriage is still illegal. Trade wars have made the shaky ground under farmers and manufacturing workers even more unstable. In a desire to find alternatives to industries such as coal or oil, people's livelihoods have been overlooked, leaving many to feel left behind all together. Children continue to be separated from their parents at the border, many fleeing a life in their home countries that is so untenable that even the risk of losing their life or their children isn't a strong enough deterrent to keep them from making the trek.

It is a hard time to be a human.

Just this week, we saw the second major hurricane to hit the eastern part of the country, bringing historic flooding and wind speeds, tearing down buildings and ripping through homes. In my hometown of Richmond,

we braced for hurricane Florence, sighed briefly with relief as it shifted south, not realizing we would be close to the impact point of another storm system which, upon colliding with the remnants of the hurricane, brought 10 tornadoes hurling across the greater Richmond area in one afternoon.

This feels like the closest metaphor for life I can articulate right now - we hunker down bracing for a hurricane, then exhale when it's a near-miss, only to be hit by 10 tornadoes in its wake.

Except there are some of us who live directly in the path of the storm and are hit by that hurricane the first time, or who have to shelter in place because they don't have the means to get out of town, or anywhere to go if they were to leave.

It is a hard time to be a human.

Surely this is not what Columbus envisioned when he landed on this hemisphere way back in October of 1492. Surely this is not the America my ancestors imagined when they climbed off the Mayflower, or when they later penned the Declaration of Independence asserting the self-evident truths "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." This is not the future they envisioned.

Standing before you as I am - a queer, non-binary person, assigned female at birth - in a pulpit - I think it's safe to say there are a lot of things about this particular situation they didn't envision.

The thing is, when I look around today, I realize this is exactly the America they envisioned. My ancestors, determined as they may have been, were shortsighted. They were arrogant and misguided in their understanding of what it meant to follow God, corrupted by the power they felt they were entitled to have and the land they saw as divinely ordained to be theirs. Armed with the word of God and an assuredness of their chosen status, they held lofty ideas about what America would be, but failed to understand that if they weren't set on making a

better life for everyone, they weren't making a better life for anyone. And they were using the very texts I hold as sacred as their justification for doing so.

It's in times like this that we need to hear some Good News.

And it's in times like this when it's helpful to remember that, though the Bible may be usurped by those in power to maintain a death-dealing status-quo, scripture is, on the whole, written by and for people from the underside: people who know what it is to suffer under the weight of an oppressive religious and social order. Scripture isn't written by people in power - it's exploited by them for sure, but if any of us who feel burdened with the very weight of existence these days can take comfort in anything, it's knowing that we are on the side of the prophets and the Gospel writers. Gospels are written in times like this.

The Gospel of Mark in particular was written in a time and for a people in the midst of conflict and uncertainty - people who faced maldistribution of economic resources and war, tension all sides. The contradiction between the way the world was and the way it was supposed to be seemed far too great. Those on the margins of society were pushed even further out by the social and religious elite who saw them impure or unclean, irrevocably broken. The very institutions which were intended to protect the most vulnerable in society instead exposed them to greater danger. Mark's primary audience is a community composed of common people, who suffered from the daily realities of disease, poverty, and disenfranchisement. Experiencing unparalleled tribulation, their lives and livelihoods were in the hands of leaders who seemed to be getting away with injustice after injustice. They felt powerless.

It was a hard time to be a human.

It is into this context that we find today's Gospel lesson. The rich man comes before Jesus kneeling, calling him "Good Teacher." The man is a wealthy landowner in a time when wealthy landowners had a great deal of

control over the livelihoods of the people like much of Mark's audience. Apparently having earned a great deal of power and money in this life, this man wants to know what he can do to ensure he's covered for the next life as well.

Jesus's response to the man seems curious at first. He doesn't launch into a story, but he simply quotes scripture. The use of scripture throughout Mark is intended to remind those who are being beaten down by their circumstances that God is constant; and, ultimately, God's will triumph. In previous chapters, Jesus has shown that he understands what the Commandments look like when they are more than empty practices or upheld traditions, but are lived into being.

Jesus recites the second tablet of Ten Commandments, those dealing with our relations to other people. Rather than "do not covet," however, Jesus says "do not defraud." The Greek word used in this passage for defraud is "often used to describe social oppression, especially keeping back wages for work (Marcus, 721). This shows us that though he may be pious, the rich man has not been just. His wealth has come on the backs of those who've suffered. In changing up the commandment, Jesus makes a passive indictment of the rich man's behavior - a zinger that would've been heard on the ears of Mark's audience of mostly peasants suffering under the thumb of the wealthy. Perhaps in his desire to prove the depth of his piety, the rich man didn't even catch Jesus' verbal slight of hand. Like a child so eager to win an argument that they don't listen, and they certainly don't hear - the rich man seems to be waiting for Jesus to finish talking so he can assert his point. The man replies as if to say, yep, yep, I get it - and I've done all of these things since I was young. You may say that no one is good but God alone - not even you, but I feel pretty confident that I'm good.

Jesus follows up with a familiar pattern he uses elsewhere in Mark, though it's unique in its combination. In healing stories, Jesus often tells the person who's been afflicted to get up as a sign of their healing. In the stories

when he calls the disciples, he calls them from the security provided by their vocation to follow him. Our lesson today is part healing story, part call story.

Only, the rich man doesn't get up or follow Jesus. He goes away, grieving.

In other biblical references, it is considered a sign of great piety for a wealthy man to give away half of his goods; Jesus is not only asking the man in our story to give away ALL of his things to the poor - to redistribute his material wealth among the very people he's been exploiting, but also to follow him. Jesus isn't looking for piety; he is looking for discipleship - this is the only way to participate in the kingdom.

The disciples' incredulous response to Jesus speaks to the common idea at the time that spiritual piety and wealth were signs of favor from God. Yet in revealing the exploitative practices of the rich man and showing his inability to put down those things in order to follow Jesus, we are shown that the sickness of finding false security in empty practices and material possessions is one that even Jesus cannot heal.

This man represents the very people who'd been creating many of the hardships faced by Mark's audience. I confess that when reading this story set in the context of the world today, I can get kind of smug about the man walking away. I struggle with those who tout their privilege or who are overly vocal about their piety. I know his type and I don't trust him. And yet, Jesus looks at this man and he loves him.

It's hard for me to love him, and I confess that I don't always want to.

Last year for Christmas, my mom gave my 4-year-old-son a book by the Christian author Max Lucado. It's the story of a village of wooden people called Wemmicks, who live together in a village beneath the home of Eli, the wood carver who made them. The Wemmick's entire existence is spent going around town giving each other stickers. Each Wemmick has a box of star stickers and a box of dot stickers - stars are given to those who do things well, or who are attractive. Dots are given to the Wemmicks whose paint is chipped or peeling, or who

can't dance or sing all that well. There's one wemmick, Punchinello, who is only given dots - not a star on him. The story goes that Punchinello isolates himself more and more, frustrated by the way things are and feeling incapable of doing anything to change it. Until he meets a wemmick who has no stars or dots - they just don't stick to her. When he asks about why this is, she says that it's simple - she goes and sees Eli, the wood carver, every day. So, in children's book fashion, Punchinello goes to see Eli and speaks to him. Punchinello learns from Eli that the stars and dots only mean something if you let them - that what really matters isn't what the other Wemmicks think but what Eli thinks. As Punchinello leaves his first meeting with Eli, the wood carver tells him that he sees him and he loves him, just as he is. Punchinello doesn't reply, but acknowledges to himself that he believes Eli is telling the truth. And - plink - we see the first dot fall from Punchinello's scratched and imperfect surface as Punchinello begins to believe that he is loved for who he is.

My son has been really into this book lately, so I've gotten very familiar with the story.

And every time we finish it, I relate to Punchinello so deeply - I've been given my share of dots for sure, and for a long time I believed I was worthy of those dots and started giving them to myself, convinced that there wasn't much I could do that was worth much at all.

And I honestly feel like the sense of worthlessness I had for so long was the greatest gift I could've ever been given. Because in the years I've been working to unlearn that narrative, I have found a sense of love for myself that I never thought would've been possible.

At the same time, I also feel such a deep sadness for the Wemmicks covered in stars, because they likely won't ever see the need to visit Eli.

Read in this light, I find I am much more able to understand and to love the rich man in today's story. He was under the idea that his wealth and his piety would give him security. The man doesn't understand that the very

things he's built around himself as a way of asserting his salvation are the very things keeping him from it. The kingdom isn't a thing we experience after we die - it is a new way to live. The rich man has convinced himself that his belongings are his substance. When Jesus asks him to follow him, he is asking him to let go of the false idea that his piety is his substance and to claim who he is as God's beloved. Claiming that for ourselves is tough because it requires vulnerability - it calls us to peel back the layers we have created, often to protect ourselves by fitting into the expectations set by systems that do not have our health or wholeness in mind. It also calls us to care for one another - financially and spiritually, and to let ourselves be seen - and I'm not talking about those on the margins, but those with the most privilege.

Jesus was offering him a better way, and Jesus wasn't naive. He knew that he was asking the man to give up material comforts and to live into the fullness of the kingdom. He knew that following the way would bring suffering, but it also brought life.. He was asking the man to give away all of the things that hindered his relationship with his community and with God because only in doing so would he be able to experience the feeling of truly knowing what it is to be God's beloved.

We are called to offer nothing less than all we've got. And in doing so, we are able to feel and live and love fully into who we are and who we have been created to be.

This last week, on October 11, many of us in the LGBTQIA community celebrated National Coming Out Day. On October 11, 1987, half a million people marched on Washington for LGBTQIA+ rights. In the midst of a climate where being LGBTQIA+ made someone a target of discriminatory legislation and rejection from their family and place of worship, people's willingness to march publicly was a way of claiming their identities. National Coming Out Day was started in 1988, on the first anniversary of the march on Washington for LGBTQIA+ rights. It was started in the midst of a climate where being LGBTQIA+ made someone a target of

discriminatory legislation and rejection from their families and places of worship. Coming out is an act of claiming one's identity as beautiful and beloved, and making visible that which had been previously unseen.

Though there have been significant gains in the thirty years since that first National Coming Out Day, the world is in many ways still unsafe for LGBTQIA+ people, and too many people still risk losing their families, jobs, homes, or their lives if they come out. For many, not just those in the LGBTQIA+ community, but for all of us, there is a feeling that things are getting worse, that the optimism we allowed ourselves to feel in the gains of the last decades was futile and misplaced.

The world is not getting worse; we have simply avoided our systemic wounds for too long. We are now charged with the painful and liberating task of continuing to uncover that which has been hidden, to reveal the parts of ourselves we have avoided and, in doing so, to work together to heal.

It's a hard time to be a human and we are in the midst of a reckoning of sorts in this country - where things are being uncovered and revealed - stories being told - and it is like opening a wound. And I believe the balm for that wound begins with being honest with ourselves and one another about the things we have allowed to give us a false sense of security in favor of the depth of real connection.

Coming out is a call for people to share a part of themselves that has previously been unseen - a pulling back of the veil to reveal that which was hidden. And we all have those - whether or not we identify as LGBTQ+. It is an act of creating community and solidarity, particularly with those who, for so many reasons, are not able to come out themselves. Coming out is a life-giving act of claiming of one's self in the midst of a world where the prevailing narrative is death-dealing; it is a bold proclamation that we are here and that our stories matter, a refusal to be invisible. It is an invitation to bring people along the journey with us, to invite them into our individual stories as part of our collective story. I believe sharing who we are with others is an invitation to mutual vulnerability and collective healing.

The kind of hope Mark presents calls us to recognize God's presence in the world on the face of the outcast, the marginalized, the poor, the hungry, the hopeless; because hope is best understood by those who have something worth hoping for . . . something to hope beyond.

The Gospel is intended to instill in us a sense of hope beyond our current circumstances, and to fuel our actions to step into that hope. It encourages and empowers us to press on and to remember that the actions of Jesus did not end on the cross. We and challenged them to continue working to bring about the kingdom of which he spoke. Jesus isn't naive about what the people are facing, and we shouldn't be, either. The Gospel of Mark says to those who are disenfranchised, hopeless, struggling: I see you, and this isn't the way the world should be. I can show you a better way. The good news- is ours to carry out into the world, to resurrect a message of hope in the face of a world that is often deaf and blind to it. We can look around and have every reason to give up, but we are called instead to cling to the message proclaimed by Jesus - a vision of the world where those who have lived too long on the edge of despair are no longer suffering, but are thriving. Where the body of Christ isn't an empty metaphor but a living, breathing community of believers struggling together and bearing with one another, sharing meals, opening their homes, and becoming co-creators of the kingdom here on earth.

We are held in tension between the reality of what is, and the expectation of what should be - and hope stems from this contradiction. The hope presented in Mark's Gospel and made manifest in the person of Jesus is held in the tension between the reality of what is and the expectation of what should be. Mark's Gospel calls us to look honestly at ourselves and at the death-dealing structures we have held up so that we might change our ways, leave behind the things which have given us a false sense of security and instead see and experience together a kingdom where the last are first, the hungry are fed, where we are all seen and held and can live fully as the beloved children of God that we are.

And that is good news indeed.