

Blogging toward Sunday

Why caricature the rich man as smug and self-righteous when Mark shows him humbly asking an existential question?

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Today's Gospel reading worries Christians seriously contemplating Jesus' rigorous discipleship teaching. Preachers do well to honor both the worry and the teaching. All three parts of the story—Jesus and the rich man ([17-22](#)), Jesus and the disciples ([23-27](#)) and Jesus' reply to Peter ([28-31](#))—concern money and discipleship.

Because this is a story of failed discipleship, commentators often criticize the rich man, but it is not clear that the Gospel does so. He is sincere and serious, kneeling before Jesus and addressing him as "good teacher." Jesus' reply ("Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone") is less a rebuke than one of several Markan hints at Jesus' true identity—an identity hidden until his crucifixion.

Why caricature the rich man as smug and self-righteous when Mark shows him humbly asking a genuine question that is existentially real for him? Instead, we might notice that Jesus probes his level of commitment by asking not about his beliefs but about his practices: has he kept God's commandments?

The commandment "do not defraud," while not in the Decalogue, reflects the Bible's compelling interest in economic justice. Jesus' mention of it invites him to assess how he achieved his wealth: was it gained honestly? The man's answer, "I have kept all these since my youth," need not be read as arrogant or self-aggrandizing. Rather, the dialogue establishes his integrity and seriousness.

"Jesus, looking at him, loved him." The loving gaze of Jesus penetrates to the heart. Elsewhere in scripture he is described as the living and active Word of God whose

gaze, like a scalpel, dissects bone from marrow, the one whose winnowing fork separates wheat from chaff. His love sees clearly and speaks truthfully.

Today we might describe Jesus' word to the rich man as an intervention, love bold enough to step between an addict and his addiction: first things first; changing one thing changes everything.

"You lack one thing," Jesus tells him. "Go, sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." (This was the story that converted Francis of Assisi.)

Discipleship begins when the one thing that enslaves us is renounced and all its claims upon us are dissolved. We see the extent of the poor rich man's captivity by his downturned head as he slowly retreats. This is the one thing he thinks he cannot do.

Like many stories in Mark's Gospel, this one is open-ended. The narrator does not add, "and he lived unhappily ever after." We are free to wonder: did the rich man later realize that as a disciple he would gain a support group? That Jesus' invitation conferred the power to accept it? That "mission impossible" is God's daily agenda?

We are not told. Instead, Jesus directs our attention to the power of riches. How hard it is for those who have riches.... Preachers must keep awake: it is tempting to generalize the problem to "whatever keeps us from following Jesus wholeheartedly." But then perhaps we too would be walking away from Jesus.

Money is an enslaving power: our possessions have a way of possessing us. How hard it is to stay with the story and to submit to that loving gaze of Jesus as it discerns the roles money plays in our own lives.

"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the reign of God." Forget the medieval fantasy about a special camel's gate in Jerusalem or trying to change the Greek word for "camel" into the similar word "rope," as if that would help. These attempts at domestication miss the point of Jesus' jolting joke.

It startles disciples then and now. Isn't material wealth evidence of God's blessing? If a rich person fails to enter God's reign, "[then who can be saved?](#)" But there is no prosperity gospel here. Even the material blessings of discipleship in community

come "[with persecutions.](#)"

Jesus' invitation to discipleship is still on the table. Will anyone pick it up?