

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

*Rev. Andy Rutrough*

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October 10, 2021

Mark 10:17-31

Last week I took a good deal of time saying that the Bible is more than just a book of rules.

The Bible has rules in it. In fact, it has the Ten Commandments in it, as well as Jesus's Greatest Commandments: "You will love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your strength and all your mind, and you will love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." That is, everything that has to do with right and wrong.

But the Bible is more than just a book of commands. It is scripture. Scripture does not just tell us what to do. Scripture tells us who we are, and who God is, and who Jesus is.

Today's Gospel lesson tells us who Jesus is. Jesus is setting out on a journey. In fact through this whole section of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is on a journey to Jerusalem, where he will be crucified; where his cross and resurrection will change everything in the universe.

God comes to us in Jesus at the cross, at the places where we are most vulnerable, most broken, most humiliated, most powerless. In Jesus God also comes to us where we are most cruel, most petty, most vindictive, most cowardly, most hateful, again, at the cross. Jesus brings the presence of God and the love of God to us there, precisely there. That changes everything.

Jesus is on the journey of the cross. That's who Jesus is.

We follow Jesus, so we are on the journey of the cross too. That's who we are.

And a man comes up to Jesus and asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" After some conversation, Jesus says, "obey the commandments." The man says "I have done that since I was a kid." Jesus looks at him and loves him. Then he says, "You lack one thing. Go, sell all your possessions, and have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

Here is something else this passage tells us about Jesus. Jesus will make demands on us.

Sometimes people have tried to soften this demand, explain it away. Some people have suggested that this man was somehow dishonest, not asking Jesus with the proper attitude. But there is no evidence of bad attitude in the text. The man runs up to Jesus. The man kneels before him. This man is asking in good faith.

Sometimes people refer to a suggestion by a guy from the eight hundred's AD, that there might have been a gate in Jerusalem called the eye of the needle, and the only way for a camel to get through that gate was if it went through on its knees. So maybe it's okay to be rich after all, you just have to be humble, able to get on your knees.

That's a good thought. Unfortunately, there is no evidence for such a gate from the time of Jesus, neither in any writings nor in any archeology.

So maybe Jesus is speaking plainly. To follow him, we need to sell our possessions and come after him

That may be. Indeed, if we see the Bible first and foremost as a book of rules, then that's what we need to do. We need to sell all our possessions, give to the poor and follow Jesus. We also are prohibited from divorce, as we talked about last week, or at least if we get a divorce we aren't allowed to marry again. If we are gay or lesbien we are not allowed to have a life together with someone of the same sex whom we love. Also, we probably shouldn't wear wool and cotton or at least not wool and linen at the same time. We shouldn't plant two different kinds of crops in the same field, and we aren't allowed to lend at interest. So if you have insurance of any kind, retirement portfolio of any kind, stocks or bonds, or if you have a bank account that pays interest, you need to pull your money out right now.

That's what we need to do if the Bible is a book of rules.

And maybe. Maybe that's what Jesus means. Maybe Jesus wants us to sell all we have, give to the poor and follow him.

I will say one thing certainly. Certainly, Jesus will make demands on us. Jesus will require that we make ourselves less safe, less wealthy, less highly regarded in society, less powerful, in order to show the love of God for us, for every other human being and for every atom of this bright creation. Less safe, less wealthy, less highly regarded in society, less powerful, in order to lift up people who are more vulnerable than we are.

This does not just apply to us as individuals. Amos, in our Hebrew Scripture for today, speaks to the whole nation, the whole society, the whole economy, a prosperous economy, a society that is doing well. He says, "You all keep on making money by exploiting the poor and refusing to give them wages that they can live on. You take advantage of their powerlessness, and God is furious with you. Turn back to God. Change your ways, MAYBE God will have mercy!"

Amos speaks to the whole society.

Jesus will make demands. But notice, unlike Amos, Jesus makes demands because he loves us.

Look at what it says, Jesus looked at the young man and loved him. That's when he says "go, sell all you have." This is not because Jesus is judging us. It's not because Jesus hates us or even because he is angry at us. It's because he loves.

See, here's the thing. Without a love bigger than ourselves, without God's love, which embraces people who are vulnerable, including the poor, our wealth has no purpose, our safety is for us alone, our status is nothing but a show, our power only serves itself. It's empty. It becomes a trap, a prison, a husk. Jesus tells us to make sacrifices as individuals and as a society, because it's healthier for us; because he loves us.

The disciples, of course, are dismayed. This is what we are like. We are dismayed. "Who then can be saved?" they ask. They know we human beings don't like to give

up our stuff, especially if its to benefit somebody else who has less than we do. “Who then can be saved?”

Jesus says, “For people it is impossible, but not for God.” This is who God is. “For God, all things are possible.”

You know what? We are able to do away with extreme poverty and hunger. We have the ability. It just means some sacrifice. We humans, will we make that sacrifice? Not without God’s help.

But with God all things are possible. If we as a society and as a species do reduce poverty, or end it, that will be a witness to the power and love of God. If we as individuals make a sacrifice for the sake of someone else who is more vulnerable than we are, that is a witness to the power and love of God.

So Jesus will make demands on us as we travel this journey of the cross. He will make demands out of love. We can act, with God’s help. We can act not out of fear, but out of love. And God, well, this is what God is like: for God all things are possible. Anything can happen. Anything. Thanks be to God.