

Mark 10:17-31

As 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?"

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; Honor 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."

In Mark, Jesus laid down a tough criteria for entering the Kingdom of God and achieving eternal life, didn't he? Is there anyone here willing to sell all their worldly goods, give the proceeds to the poor, and then break all bonds with all the people they love? Any way you look at it, this seems to a shocking message. The question is what is Jesus asking of us? We know he loves us, so what's the deeper message?

Perhaps a way of getting at Jesus's message is to consider how we are going to address some other challenges that in many respects are no less severe.

Last Monday a U.N. Intergovernmental Government Panel on Climate Change announced that we humans have perhaps a decade to save humanity, and doing so will require us to keep global warming to a maximum of 1.5 Centigrade through reducing the amount of carbon emissions by 1 billion tons per year similar to the amount currently being generated annually by China alone – and that as just a down payment towards eliminating our use of carbon as an energy source by the year 2050, and replacing it with renewable options such as wind, solar, hydro, and geothermal power.

Further, we have to initiate an all-out effort to plant trees as they absorb carbon, launch an international effort to take carbon out of the atmosphere and bury that carbon back in the ground, shift from eating meat to a plant-based diet, and implement a plan to move people away from flood prone areas resulting from rising seas – now before an increasing number of violent hurricanes and expanding regions of drought make that challenge even greater and more chaotic.

That's one of three options we humans face according to a team of researchers at the University of Rochester led by Professor Adam Frank. A second option is that if we fail to keep global warming to 1.5 centigrade or less, then seventy percent of the world's population will die off before we reach a level of sustainability; reducing our use of fossil fuels commensurate with a much smaller population base. The third option is that we continue deplete all resources on the planet blowing past a 2 centigrade rise resulting in the sixth mass extinction on a scale similar to the end of the End Permian Age when 96 percent of all life died off, a time when life barely made it back.

The challenge we face in addressing climate change is daunting, particularly when the leadership of our own country believes that human actions such as using carbon as an energy source doesn't contribute to climate change; a leadership that doesn't believe that our warming of the atmosphere has resulted in the increasing severity of hurricanes like Michael that just laid waste to the Florida and has hit North and South Carolina along with Virginia with more flooding, the last thing the people of those states need.

Technically, we have the skills and tools to get out of this self-created mess; that's not our challenge, Our challenge has more to do in changing our whole way of living. So too Jesus says when it comes to entering the Kingdom of Heaven, we need a change in the values and behaviors we hold most dear. We have to let them go, a task no easier than a camel slithering through the eye of a needle.

Many think that Jesus was giving us a metaphor, that he was referring to an ancient gate into Jerusalem that was too narrow and low for a fully laden camel to walk through such as the one pictured in the bulletin. As you can imagine, back then tax collectors loved such gates as it made it tough on the wily merchants to hide the value and amount of goods they were bringing to market. However, archeologists have found no such gate in Jerusalem, so it is unlikely that was what Jesus was referring to. I believe that he was asking for far more than just distributing one's worldly goods to the poor. He in fact said, that's not enough. Yes, he did ask for that, but said in of itself that action will not get you into heaven.

So, what was he asking?

Let's go back to our challenge facing climate change, or for that matter ending the partisanship in Congress. What do you here in this room think is the root cause of the partisanship in Congress, and what needs to change to get our elected leaders to set down their differences and working in a collaborative manner to address the shared challenges and needs of all Americans. What will it take for them to set aside their growing hate or fear of those on the other side of the political divide?

Any thoughts? (ask people in the congregation for ideas)

Let's now step back and consider the lesson of Mark. At the time, many felt that those who were wealthy were especially blessed by God. As then, some our society blame the poor for being poor, the uneducated for not being educated, and those not doing great things in life as failures; they view helping the unfortunate is akin to throwing good money after bad. We'll let in immigrants they say, but only those who are well educated, were a success in their former countries, or can pay a large immigration fee.

Those coming had been living in poverty, violent societies or regions caught up in wars; let's keep them out as they failed to solve the problems within their own nations, so why should we let them in here. The old phrase, we welcome the huddled masses, was a sweet romantic idea by some poet, but that was yesterday, today we only accept the best; and those who are white are even better.

It is that attitude that God's want us to change. If you give away all your money to the poor and still think you are superior to those that are less

fortunate, then as Jesus says, you have all the chance of getting into heaven that a camel does squeezing through the eye of a needle. He wants us to change our relationship to each other.

God wants people to truly understand that we are all made of the same dust. He wants us to be able to walk in another's shoes. We need to value all life. We humans cannot survive without the birds and bees, or these many lifeforms that we are driving to extinction at a rapid rate as we choke the rivers, lakes, streams, oceans, soil, and air with our pollution.

Jesus is calling us to enter into a new world view wherein all are worthy. Think not about what he is asking us to give up, but rather what he says we will gain. We have a similar challenge in getting Congress to work together or addressing climate change. People are afraid to give up what they now receive from carbon as an energy source and are not thinking what we all will gain if we all do so. We have to let go of thoughts of self-preservation and setting aside our individual desires for the collective and future good.

When we took the step towards open and affirming, we took but one step towards saying all people matter, which includes those who voted both for and against open and affirming. We are all in this boat, this congregation together. Look around at each other. Look into the eyes of another you don't know so well. That person is special. So too is the person who gives you change at Stewarts, is living at the Neighborhood House, or needs our help in creating a home through Habitat for Humanity.

Walking this walk is not easy. It requires of us to follow God's teaching not just on Sunday morning, but every day and every minute of the week. He's asking us to become his disciples not in the sense of one who just learns from another, but one that embodies God's message and leads. He wants us to step out of our comfort zones, way out of our comfort zones to the point it becomes a little bit scary, maybe even a lot scary – and then let go. Don't worry, Jesus will be there to catch us. Life will get better, not immediately, probably not in our lifetimes, but what we can do is set our nation, world, and souls on a path towards the light.

It's not going to be easy. Voting for open and affirming was the easy part, the harder part will be walking and building on that vision. Good news is that nobody in this room is alone. We are all on this journey together. We are each other's safety net, coach, friend, and buddy.

Last week when our Senate was trashing civil norms and damaging the Supreme Court, this little church, in this tiny rural community surrounded by the largest wilderness east of the Rocky Mountains said yes, everybody matters.

I can't imagine a better place to be or people to be with.