

Sermon: Sunday 10 October 2021 – Mark 10: 17-31; Amos 5: 6-7, 10-15
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“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

I wonder what drove the man to Jesus. I wonder what was going on in his life that caused him to run to Jesus, kneel down, and ask his question. What’s the desperation behind his question? What’s his desire?

We could speculate about him, but chances are there have been times in your life when you asked the same kind of question. I know I have. It’s a restless, sleepless night kind of question. It’s a daytime longing and searching kind of question. It’s the kind of question that becomes a prayer or a call to a friend. It’s more than just a religious question. It was for the man and it is for us. And it’s not about the future. It’s about this moment. It’s about life and it’s about being more alive. What must I do to have the fullness of life right here, right now?

This question is about a quality of life, not a quantity. The man in today’s gospel reading has plenty. He’s rich with property, possessions, wealth. Think back to when you got something you really wanted – did you find yourself still wanting more? Something was missing and quantity could not fill the emptiness of quality.

The Book of Amos is full of prophecies warning Israel of its impending doom and destruction unless it turns back to obeying God’s laws. In our Old Testament reading, we hear extracts from a Lament and Call for Repentance. Amos is warning about storing up treasures on earth, especially when it impacts on those who are poor and needy. I don’t suppose any of us has planted lush vineyards, or imposed taxes on grain, or built stone mansions. But do we have more than we need to live our lives and to what extent do we use what we have to support the poor and the needy, both locally and across the globe?

Coming back to our Gospel reading, Jesus tells the man there is one thing he lacks. He already knows that. That’s why he is asking his question. What Jesus does is show him a way forward. He offers a new day and a fresh start.

What must I do to inherit eternal life? What must I do to be more fully alive? How do I step through the impossibility of what is and into the possibility of what might be?

We might like to turn back time, undo the past, escape the moment. That’s impossible, it’s not going to happen. But what is the possibility in that impossibility? That’s our real question and it’s the one the man in today’s gospel is asking. He wants a different quality of life, a second chance, a new beginning, a new day.

It’s so easy to hear Jesus’ words as a challenge, as something to be accomplished, as demanding more than we are prepared to give or do. “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

But what if we hear Jesus' words as words of hope and words of salvation? I am not talking about salvation as a reward, as being made safe, or even comfortable; but as being turned upside down, being unhinged, a reordering of life, a freedom to become, the gift of a new day. And I am not talking about hope as a feeling, a wish, or an escape from this moment; but as a coming of the possibility in the impossible, a voice, a calling that asks a response from us.

Isn't that really what Jesus is offering the man in today's gospel? Hope. Salvation.

To get this new life, the old one must be let go of. And that's hard when there is so much to let go of. The man is invested in what he has. Most of us are. And what he wants will cost him everything he has. There can be no holding on to the things or events of the past if we want to step into a new day. That doesn't mean we forget, deny, or ignore the past. It just means the past no longer defines what is or is not possible.

This letting go of the old for the new is not a trade, an exchange, or a balancing of the books. And it's not a price we pay to God. It's about the freedom to become, the freedom to step into a new life, the freedom to see the possibility in the impossible.

What might we need to let go of in order to step into a new day and make a fresh start? What possibilities await us in what looks like the impossible?

This is not easy work. When the man heard what Jesus said we are told: "At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth." There's a lot to let go of. Sometimes it's monetary wealth and possessions; sometimes it's a wealth of anger, fear, guilt; sometimes it's a wealth of busyness, our calendar, and task lists; sometimes it's the wealth of our reputation, another's approval, or our power; sometimes it's the wealth of ingrained habits and attitudes.

I suspect we hear this story as saying the man chose not to follow Jesus, but that's not what the text says. Today's gospel does not say that he refused to do what Jesus said. But neither does it say that he did what Jesus said. It says he turned away grieving. Maybe he went home and immediately sold his stuff, gave the money to the poor, and chased after Jesus. Maybe he did it a month later or eight years later. Or maybe he never did it. We just don't know. And that's ok, it's not important. The issue is about us, what we do or do not do.

Do you know what happened the morning after the man went away grieving? A new day dawned and the sun rose once again. Light and warmth entered our world. What more could we ask for? That's the miracle in the impossible. That doesn't necessarily make life easy or comfortable. It makes new life possible.

Please do not hear that as some sappy, feel good, Hallmark card kind of thing. Hear it for what it is. Hope. Salvation. The possibility of a fresh start. Life resurrected. The dawn of a new day. A gift.

So, in responding to God's word, what will we do with our new precious and possibility-filled day?