

October 14, 2018 Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

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GOSPEL

Mark 10:17-31

The holy gospel according to Saint Mark, the tenth chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

¹⁷As [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?” ¹⁸Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You 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.’ ” ²⁰He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” ²¹Jesus, 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.” ²²When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” ²⁴And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It 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.” ²⁶They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

²⁸Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” ²⁹Jesus 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, ³⁰who 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. ³¹But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

If we knew who our neighbors would be in heaven, I think we might live differently on earth.

The young man who comes to Jesus today is preoccupied with eternal life...with extending his comfort and good fortune beyond the bounds of mortality. He has few enough concerns about today and the days after it, that he can think ahead as far as heaven.

Perhaps we have something in common with him. There may be some of us here who are fortunate in the ways he was.

And, today he comes hoping for good news from Jesus that his diligence in keeping the law will earn him comfort not just now...but for forever...

Jesus does not offer him that good news...

...which is not to say that Jesus doesn't offer good news.

He does. But it is not the news the young man seems to want.

When we are fortunate in earthly life, I think we can be tempted to try to make eternity in its image. We imagine heavenly mansions...physical comfort... plentiful food. And it may truly be like that...

But when we make heaven in the image of life on earth...we miss the difference between eternal life in heaven and kingdom of God.

See they aren't the same thing. I'll say it again...Eternal life...and the kingdom of God...are not the same thing.

The kingdom of God...Mark shows us throughout his gospel...is something that is close at hand. It is something that comes to earth. It is not on the other side of mortality.

And the life we know now...is not the blueprint for eternal life. And if we really thought about it, we wouldn't want it to be, would we? Even when we are fortunate...there is too much suffering...too much injustice...for us to really wish that heaven looked like this world as we know it. And if we have even an ounce of compassion...of course we hope that it will be different not just for our sake, but for others...because we know that our lives are woven into a web of others who may suffer much more or have much less than we do.

And I hope we don't want *that* to be a part of eternal life.

Maybe some of us do...or think we do...

I helped with a funeral...at the downtown cathedral church where I worked after college...for a prominent member of the legal community...whose specialty was eminent domain law...I learned that day that another name for it is "condemnation law." One of the eulogists that day actually used the phrase, "Jim was a master of condemnation." He

seemed to say it without any sense of irony...in the middle of a church service...where condemnation was, of course, the opposite of what we hoped for and believed in. He also spoke at length about the burial plots that this man and his family had purchased in the very expensive cemetery in the middle of town...and how he had also asked his friends to buy plots in the same area. They would all be buried together.

It would have been sweet...if it hadn't sounded so much like they were planning a sort of eternal gated community. It was unnerving.

I don't know if he meant it all the way it sounded to me. Perhaps he hadn't thought of the implications of it all. Or maybe I heard it wrong.

But it made me think...even if we can pick our neighbors in the cemetery...we don't get to pick our neighbors in heaven...and I wonder if meditating on that might lead us to live differently here on earth.

Because we really are all connected...now...already...Our fate is bound up together...whether we can perceive or accept it or not. And I imagine that my neighborhood in heaven might very well be populated with the people I could have cared for...and didn't...or the people I could have known...but instead ignored....

I wonder if knowing who were my eternal neighbors would change my life now.

So, no, I don't think the world we know offers a blueprint for eternity. But...I also don't think the design is a secret.

Because the kingdom of God and eternity are not the same thing...so when Jesus and the prophets describe the kingdom that is coming...God's dream that is being born into reality even today...well...that is when we glimpse heaven on this side of mortality.

The kingdom of God is eternity's blueprint. And that is what Jesus is showing the young man in Mark's gospel today.

He is side-stepping the question of eternity...because Jesus doesn't want us to put off to eternity what God can begin to do today. Eternity is up to God...but the kingdom of God is a place we can choose to live right now.

The kingdom of God is where there are no rich or poor, or powerful or oppressed...it is where the mighty are cast down...and the hungry are filled...it is where we live fully into the knowledge that we are all a family...and when one of us suffers, our whole family is

stricken. We are only as well off as the least among us. The last will be the first and the first will be the last...because there is no line anymore where some are pushed behind so others can get ahead.

And that is great good news...if you are at the back of the line...and maybe doesn't sound as good if you've been enjoying your place at the front.

This is why Jesus says it is so hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God...because to do it, they (we?) have to let go completely of having more than anyone else...we have to step out of the line and accept the risk that comes with that. We have to give up their last dollar without any guarantee of having it back. Because it is only when we all do this that we all truly have the abundance that is possible.

Scholarly sounding arguments have been made about the eyes of needles and camels and what Jesus might really mean. Some of us have heard that the eye of the needle was a low gate at the city wall...that a camel could hardly stoop to get through...and while it is fun to imagine the physical comedy of a rich camel-rider taking a pratfall after getting clothes-lined by a low doorframe...that is not what Jesus is saying. I imagine Jesus enjoyed a moment of slapstick here or there...but there is not sufficient evidence that Jesus is talking about anything other than actual camels and actual needles...both of which are similar in size today as they were two thousand years ago.

I think Jesus really means it when he says that if we want to be a part of the kingdom of heaven we really have to be willing to give over everything we have...especially everything we have that separates us from one another in material comfort.

We sometimes look at Biblical models for how to steward our resources...and think that the Old Testament tithe of ten percent of our earnings sounds like a high bar to clear. But Jesus is setting a much higher one.

So we might identify with the young man, who went away grieving how hard Jesus' answer was...We don't know what he did next. He did not get a comfortable answer to his question. Really, he didn't get an answer at all.

Because Jesus didn't tell him about eternal life. That is for God to sort out. (And – spoiler alert – all of salvation history says again and again that the deepest desire of God's heart is to gather us together forever...so I don't think we have to worry.) Jesus did tell him about life right now, though...and he showed how hard it is to participate in the kingdom that is close right now...We will probably not succeed in selling all our possessions or giving away all our wealth...we will probably not even try.

But we may find that the more we let our lives be transformed by radical generosity...radical community...radical unity...wild, unkempt, holy abandon in loving and caring for one another...we get to begin to unroll the corner of the blueprint of heaven...and have a foretaste of the feast that is coming.

My prayer is that we can encourage each other in that holy work. Thanks be to God. Amen.