

“Overlooking the Obvious”

Based on Mark 10:17-31

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I’m not very proud of the following self-disclosure, but if one cannot laugh at oneself, life will be very long and boring. For years – and to be honest, I was until I was well into my thirties – I was a little confused about the concept of anesthesia. You know there are two kinds, general and local. General anesthesia I understood. They put the mask on your face or inject you with something and you fall asleep using a generally available and accepted form of medication. Local anesthesia, so I believed, was what each doctor personally decided to use, what was locally available and preferable. So, in New York, the doctor might hook up a bottle of nitrous oxide, and in Louisiana, a fifth of bourbon. It turns out that in this case, “local” referred to a specific part of the body, not a drug of choice, and I was forced to once again face my humanity, and acknowledge my limited intelligence, and laugh at myself.

The rich man in our story in Mark this evening has similarly overlooked the obvious. Despite remaining faithful to all God has asked him to do through the commandments of his tradition, he has overlooked the very reason for the commandments in the first place, namely that we might live as God intended, in the fullest possible shalom, that no one, not even the foreigner and the stranger in our midst need live in scarcity in the midst of the incomprehensible abundance of

God's grace and generosity. Likely well into his thirties before being faced with the truth, the rich man is forced to once again face his humanity and confront the limits of his understanding of what God requires.

It would be easy to pick on rich people using this passage, but probably a waste of time. You already know you are rich, compared to the vast majority of the world, and especially reminded by your context, and you already tithe to ECF, wink, wink, and give to charity, and try to live simply so that others may simply live. If you are not doing these things, come talk to me and we'll discuss your spiritual life. But more than that, picking on the rich would be a waste of time because even though this man's wealth is a key element in the story of his faith, and even though it is likely a key element in many of our stories of faith, if we focus on the money, we miss the point of the story. For all the Scriptural cover it provides, tonight's treatment of the text will not be a stewardship sermon, well, at least not in the traditional sense. You see, just as Jesus has said elsewhere in the gospels, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick," Jesus knows that this man needs a local, rather than general treatment, and so do we. For this man, it was his wealth, and it may be for you too, but for others it may be something else, and we would do a disservice to Christ and ourselves to overlook the other obvious things that make it difficult to "inherit eternal life," to use the rich man's words.

I want to focus for a moment on a very small, but telling, part of the story. Although Matthew and Luke also record a version of this story, Mark is the only Gospel writer to include the little description, “Jesus looking at him, loved him, and said, ‘You lack one thing.’ ” “Jesus looking at him, loved him, and said...” We can’t know exactly what Mark had in mind by including this phrase, but I construe it as his recognition that Jesus loved the man enough to speak the truth to him, not in the legal sense, but rather to speak the truth this man needed to hear. It does not take a divine genius to discern if someone is rich; often a simple look will suffice to observe fine clothes and manner. But it does take divine courage and compassion to go straight to the heart of a person’s need and to confront him or her at the point of their hardest conversion. It takes love, a divine love Christ reveals in this encounter with a man asking a variation of the question we all ask, “How do I enter into a deeper relationship with my God and Creator, a relationship that makes sense of my past, guides me in my present, and assures me of my future.”

The divine love with which Jesus spoke to the rich man is the same divine love we need still today, that truth spoken to us because we are in need of the physician to diagnose and treat our local, which is to say our personal, maladies of self-delusion, or at least our tendency to overlook the obvious in our lives. The famous suffragette Susan B. Anthony once remarked rather cynically, “I distrust those people who know so well what God wants them to do, because I notice it always coincides with their own desires,” but there is still a lot of truth in what she

said. It is part of our situation as human beings plagued with sin that we confuse our wants with God's wants for us. In the case of the rich man, his desire, at least up to the point where he seeks wisdom from Jesus, was very likely to be able to live comfortably guilt-free, secure in the knowledge that he had done what was required of him, and he saw the fulfillment of the commandments as the route to such a life. He conveniently overlooked the fact that God desires not only a life of obedience, but also of compassion and justice and mercy, and had he read his Scriptures carefully enough, he would have read the parts about gleaning, that harvest tradition of leaving behind what falls on the ground to be picked up by the poor, and of jubilee, when land and other property are to be returned every so often to their original owner to discourage the accumulation of the kind of wealth that undermines authentic community. He would have learned the connection between God's generosity and his own. He would have learned that by God's design his life was so profoundly connected with all of God's people that his wealth influenced the living conditions of others. But instead, he turned his own desires for a comfortable guilt-free life into God's desires for him, and he succeeded perfectly in meeting the lowest expectations he could, as high as the standards of the law might be. I would give him a little more benefit of the doubt that his question to Jesus was sincere had he shown the least interest in following Christ, but, we are told, he was shocked and went away grieving. Despite having the truth spoken to

him in love, he is not ready to accept the demands of that truth on his life. His self-delusion continues.

What I think is important about this passage is how it points us to examining the disconnections we make between God and certain aspects of our lives, to overlooking what to Jesus is the obvious, and to us is the convenient and comfortable. As I said earlier, money is for many of us one of the biggest of those areas. But it is not the only one. We may live lives of absolute simplicity, giving away all but what we need to survive, and still harbor a resentment against someone which keeps us from following Christ. We may lead generous and resentment-free lives, but persist in denying that we are lovable and go away sorrowful at the invitation to be loved by God in Jesus Christ. We may lead generous, resentment-free, love-filled lives, but delude ourselves that adultery does not affect the commitments we make to our spouses and our children, not to mention God. I think you get the picture. Each of us will have those key points of overlooking the obvious contradictions of the lives we actually lead with the lives God calls us to lead. And it is at those points that we may thank God that Christ, looking at us, loves us, and says, “You lack one thing,” and points out that one thing, or those several things, which remain a barrier between us and the most intimate form of communion with God and indeed all creation.

I shared with the children last Sunday, and wrote about in this week’s Emerge, Council’s decision to affirm that ECF is the “heart, hands, and voice of

Jesus Christ in Costa Rica's English-speaking community." In the coming months, we will be coming to terms with what the statement means, and I hope you will begin to see it in tonight's Gospel lesson. If we are indeed the heart, hands, and voice of Jesus Christ, it is we who are called to do in these times just what Jesus did in his encounter with that man, by looking, loving, and speaking the truth in that love saying, "You lack one thing," and pointing out that one thing, or those several things, which keep us from following Christ. We do that with our hearts, yes, but with our voices too. We do that not to control or manipulate, but because God has given us eyes to see, and courage to speak to the needs we see in those whom we know or meet. We do that invitationally, and when our advice is sought, but also when we see injustice that cannot be ignored. We do not do it casually, or to try to change people's behavior that we don't like, but because we want to pass on the healing we have experienced when we met the healer of our places of self-delusion.

Jesus' encounter with the man in Mark is followed by a dose of hyperbole about the possibility of the rich entering heaven, offered in the very graphic image of a camel passing through the eye of a needle. Not only does this image remind us of how challenging it is to overcome those choke points in our lives, but it calls to mind another of Jesus' hyperboles that is apt as we reflect on being the heart, hands, and voice of Christ. Elsewhere in Scripture we are reminded that it is best not to attempt to remove a speck from someone else's eye without first removing

the log from our own. Being the heart, hands, and voice of Jesus Christ in the world begins with being ministered to by the same loving Christ through the hearts, hands, and voices of other Christians. We each need to confront those points of self-delusion unless we are to be hypocrites for Christ. We may take a while overcoming what keeps us from following fully, faithfully, and consistently, but at least if we are working on them, slowly if surely giving away our possessions, so to speak, we have a place of integrity from which to offer what we have to offer. And lest the prospect of personal transformation paralyze us, let us remember how our passage from Mark concludes, “For mortals, it is impossible, but not for God; for God, all things are possible.” May God bless us as we confront those areas of our lives in which God can do the impossible in Jesus Christ and as we seek to be his heart, hands, and voice to those folks who, like the rich man, are seeking a relationship with God that makes sense of their past, guides them in their present, and assures them of their future. Amen.