

Scripture Lesson: Mark 10:17-31

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 43-44

¹⁷As 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?" 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."

Mark 10:17-31

10/06/2024 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

"The Last Shall Be First"

Rev. Amy Terhune

Everyone in the apartment complex knew who Ugly was. Ugly was the resident tomcat, and he loved three things in this world: fighting, eating garbage, and affection. The combination of these things combined with a life spent outside had their effect on Ugly. To start with, he had only one eye, and where the other should have been, there was a nasty scar. He was missing an ear on one side. His left foot had been badly broken at one time and had healed at an unnatural angle, making him look like he was always turning the corner. Ugly would have been a dark gray tabby, striped type, except for the sores covering his head, neck, and even his shoulders. Every time someone saw Ugly there was the same reaction. "That's one UGLY cat!!!"

All the children were warned not to touch him. The adults turned a hose on him when he tried to come in their homes, or even shut his paws in the door when he got persistent. Ugly always had the same reaction. If someone turned the hose on him, he would stand there, getting soaked until they gave up and quit. If someone threw things at him, he would curl his lanky body around their feet in forgiveness. Whenever he spied children, he would come running, meowing frantically and bump his head against their hands, begging for their love. If anyone ever picked him up, he would immediately begin suckling on their shirt, their earrings, the drawstring of their hoodie, whatever he could find.

One day Ugly shared his love with the neighbor's dogs. They did not respond kindly, and Ugly was badly mauled. A single young woman in the apartment complex named Kendra rushed to his aid, but by the time Kendra got to where he was laying, it was apparent that Ugly's sad life was drawing to a close.

As she picked him up and tried to carry him home, Kendra could hear him wheezing and gasping and could feel him struggling to breathe in her arms. He must be hurting terribly, she thought. Then she felt a familiar tugging, sucking sensation on her ear. Ugly, in so much pain, suffering and obviously dying, was trying to suckle her ear. Kendra pulled him closer, and he bumped the palm of her hand with his head, then he turned his one golden eye towards her, and she heard the distinct sound of purring.

Even in the greatest pain, that ugly battled-scarred cat was asking only for a little affection, perhaps some compassion. At that moment, Kendra was suddenly convinced that Ugly was the most beautiful, creature she had ever seen. Never once did he struggle, or try to bite or scratch, to get away. Ugly just looked up at her completely trusting in her to relieve his pain.

Ugly died in Kendra's arms before she could get inside, but she sat and held him for a long time afterwards, thinking about how one scarred, deformed little stray could so alter her opinion about what it means to have true pureness of spirit.

Kendra says, "Ugly taught me more about giving and compassion than a thousand books, lectures, or talk show specials ever could, and for that I will always be thankful. He had been scarred on the outside, but I was scarred on the inside, and it's time for me to move ahead and learn to love truly and deeply—to give my all to those I care for. Many people want to be richer, more successful, well liked, and beautiful—except for me," says Kendra. "I will always try to be Ugly." [7 ¶s adapted from www.godslittleacre.net/inspirationalstories/ugly_the_tomcat.html.]

Friends, the world is full of Uglys – and not all of them are cats. Some of them are people. They fight, they take in garbage, they're a nuisance, but they want the same things the rest of us want: to be loved and accepted. And sometimes, the ones who have been hurt the most are the ones most ready to forgive and move on. Our world is mean. At least, it feels that way to me. I don't want to be part of making it meaner. I'm with Kendra – I want to be like Ugly, too.

Jesus was always Ugly in this way, too. He loved totally and completely. He gave of himself for others. He never saw people as others saw people. He understood the intrinsic value of each person, for he saw people through the lens of love. Take this morning's text, for example. It's often called 'the rich, young ruler', and it needs to be dealt with squarely. We need to face what it has to say to us, right here, right now in today's materialistic society. There are two vital lessons I want us to learn today, but I'll get to those in just a minute. Before I do that, however, I need to acknowledge that this is not an easy text. The debate around this text can leave one's head spinning. Some argue that the rich young ruler is an arrogant, egotistical smooth-talker who comes to Jesus and begins by trying to flatter him. "Good teacher," he says. And Jesus sees right through that—"Why do you call me good, no one is good but God alone."

But allow me to point out that—unlike Nicodemus, who snuck around to see Jesus in the middle of the night—this man comes to Jesus in daylight hours and kneels at Jesus' feet in the dusty road. He comes running, as a matter of fact. For a member of the upper class to come to Jesus in this way would not have gone unnoticed. It's a courageous move—don't underestimate it. And unlike so many others of his station and rank at the time, all indications are that this young man comes very sincerely. He wants to know what he must do to inherit eternal life – a question that I find bizarre, given that there's little we can do to inherit anything. No matter how hard I try, I'll never inherit the fortunes of Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, or Elon Musk. I have no claim there. What I have inherited came from my family – mostly family heirlooms that tell our story, and I treasure them, not because of their financial value, but because of the connections they represent.

Could it be that this young man is really asking how he can come to know God as father – how he can find the connection he longs for. He kept all the rules. He knows his scriptures. He's hungry for

something that eludes him. And Jesus knows it. Scripture says that Jesus, looking at him, loved him. I'm always touched by that sentence. Jesus tries to give him what he's missing, but the guy doesn't connect. Sell what you have and give it to the poor, Jesus says. Which seems harsh. But what we've got here is a young man who wants a life of faith without actually having to have any faith.

Let me read you a prayer written by scholar William Boice: "Dear Lord, I have been re-reading the record of the Rich Young Ruler and... it has set me thinking. No matter how much wealth he had, he could not ride in a car, have any surgery, turn on a light, buy penicillin, hear a pipe organ, watch TV, wash dishes in running water, type a letter, mow a lawn, fly in an airplane, sleep on an inner spring mattress, or talk on the phone." Then William Boice adds these words, "If he was rich, then what am I?" [from *What Really Counts* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc., 2005), p. 303; as used in "The Good News about Money" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

It's a good question. If he's rich, what are we? And if he's told to sell everything and give it to the poor, are we supposed to do that, too? Probably not. After all, Martin Luther owned books, a home, livestock. John Wesley owned a home and an organ and a dozen scientific machines to study epilepsy! Billy Graham didn't sell everything. Henri Nouwen didn't sell everything. Even Mother Teresa, who came as close as anyone in modern times has gotten to getting rid of everything, still owned books, a typewriter, photographs, and a camera.

What do we learn from this lesson, then? First, there is a right and wrong way to understand money's purpose. Money and/or stuff is not the end. It is not even the means to an end, in and of itself. It's a tool, nothing more, nothing less. A tool among many tools we're given to be about God's business. In the hands of the corrupt, money can pervert justice, compromise values, sell out people. But in the hands of the holy, money is food for the hungry, medicine for the sick, a home for the homeless, justice for the oppressed. Money is a tool only.

Having said that, though, let me add this caveat: "You don't have to give up everything to follow Jesus. However, if we have never given up anything because of our love for Christ, then we ought to examine our level of commitment." [from "The Good News about Money" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.] Jesus calls us to follow him in living sacrificially.

Rev. Steven E. Albertin writes, "Once, when I was discussing these very words with another clergy colleague of mine, he made a very revealing observation. Discussions and debates about who is rich and who is not miss the point. He argued that the rich are those with enough money to be afraid of losing it.

"That puts Jesus' comments about riches and wealth into an entirely new context. Jesus' words urge us to look not at the amount of money we have but rather on the role money plays in our lives. [from "Through The Eye Of The Needle" by Steven E. Albertin, www.Sermons.com.]

So there's a right and a wrong way to understand money's purpose. There's also a right and wrong way to understand our purpose. This one is harder, but it brings us back around full circle. The young man in today's text is hungry to get beyond the narrow confines of a little life. He's really asking about significance. Is there a purpose behind his study, his discipline, his adherence to the religious tradition of his people? Does his life matter? He knows something is out of whack, but what?

You can't live a life of faith without actually having faith. Jesus calls us to a deeper love of God. At some point, we have to let go. We have to relinquish control. We can't hold onto money and stuff. We can't hold on to security. We can't hold onto our grudges and our anger. We can't even hold on to those we love – not indefinitely. The secret to living a Godly life is giving. The secret to meaningful living is trusting in the One who holds us. When we put ourselves and all we have and all we love into God's hands, we find what we can let go, and what we can carry. We find our way forward. We find our strength to love whole-heartedly. We find the fullness for which this young man has been longing.

Jesus is offering a security much deeper than control. He's offering a power much greater than influence. He's offering a peace more pervasive than easy street. He's offering a kind of security and peace that can be sustained even in the midst of crisis—one based in the strongest power in the world—that of love. But he's also asking for a commitment on faith's terms. So what right does Jesus have to ask for that kind of commitment? Did not Jesus do more than just sell everything? Did not Jesus give up control in the most ultimate of extremes, humbling himself to endure shame and torture to his death in order to leave us an inheritance? What must I do? Nothing! Jesus already did it! That isn't even the right question! God wants to make the impossible possible. He's calling us to a bigger vision for humankind. God wants to establish a kingdom based in love among us. But to do that, God must turn our thinking completely around. The question isn't "what must we do?" The question is: "who will we be? First United Methodist Church should be serving the last and the least. Let's start there. I guess that in a world of pretties, I want to love as freely as Ugly. May God make it so. Amen.