

SERMON: "Love Makes It Possible"

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Mark 10: 17-31

17 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?' 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.

23 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!' 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.'

28 Peter 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.'

Sermon: Love Makes It Possible

Growing up, we lived in a two family house. My grandparents lived upstairs. My parents, brothers, and I lived downstairs. My grandmother would often make a hamburger, macaroni, and mushroom casserole for us to have for dinner. Now there was no tomato sauce in this casserole and we, us kids, didn't really like it. But, being the polite children that my parents expected us to be, we told my grandmother that we loved her casserole. The problem was we weren't telling her the truth. Then one day, years later, my grandmother learned the truth. She was devastated! She had thought we all liked that meal. But we had not wanted to hurt her feelings. So when she heard the truth it was hard and her feelings were hurt.

Have you ever had someone tell you something that you did not want to hear; doing it with kindness or love? Perhaps you were told that the decision you made was not the right one. Perhaps you were told that the project you had worked hard on was not good enough. Or perhaps you were told that you had been too hard on your child, parent, or grandchild. If we hear those words from someone we respect or love, and the words come from a place of love, it can be very hard to take. It can be devastating!

In this morning's Gospel passage from Mark, the man knelt down before Jesus and asked what he needed to do to gain eternal life. Now a similar exchange is in Matthew's and Luke's as well. So the writers of the gospel felt the message was important. In Matthew's gospel Jesus was approached by a young man with many possessions. In Luke's gospel by a certain ruler. In each instance, the man has followed the commandments and asked Jesus what he needed to do to have eternal life. And Jesus gives them the reply that they never expected.

In Mark's gospel, we hear that the man has followed the commandments his whole life and thought he had been doing what he was supposed to. We do not know if he was asking Jesus this question because he was trying to justify himself, because he wanted praise or because he wanted to know exactly what he needed to do.

Regardless of the man's reason for asking his question, Jesus gave an unexpected reply. It turned this nameless man's world upside down. Jesus told him to "go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

Mark tells us that the man was shocked and went away grieving. I imagine he was totally blindsided. He thought he had been living the life he was supposed to live, according to the guidelines of his faith. So Jesus' words took him completely by surprise.

Even the disciples were shocked. You see, at that time, to be wealthy or have many possessions was considered a sign of God's favor. And to have to sell those possessions and give the money to the poor, those who supposedly were not the ones favored by God, would have been unheard of. It must have been shocking and hard to hear. So the man left, grieving.

Mark tells us, however that Jesus looked at the man with love. Jesus was not condemning that man. He did not want to humiliate him. No, we hear that Jesus loved him. Jesus could see into his heart. He understood that man. Jesus looked at the man with love.

Jesus understood how things, our possessions, can become problematic. If our goal in life is to accumulate more and more possessions, are we sharing the blessings that we have received from God? If our things become the focus of our lives, do they interfere with our relationships with our loved ones, our neighbors, or God? The more importance that we assign to things, the more we risk them becoming a focus in our lives. Jesus wants our focus to be on what's important – love of God and love of neighbor.

We may think that the man in this story was grieving because he could not sell his possessions. But, what if the man in this story went away grieving, because he knew Jesus was right? What if he accepted that he would need to change, but was sad because he couldn't imagine what his world would look like without those material things? What if his grief was over the actions he knew he would need to take and that it would turn his life upside down? After all, if he had become dependent on those material things, it would be difficult for him to do as Jesus said.

Making difficult decisions and life style changes can be challenging, for anyone. But Jesus had looked at this man with love. Jesus loved him. Jesus' love is the key. The love that Jesus has for people, the good that he sees in people, and the love that he wants them to have for him and others, is key to this story.

Jesus told the man who asked what he needed to do to gain eternal life to sell his possessions, give the money to the poor, and then come follow him. These instructions are consistent with Jesus' teachings about serving the vulnerable. Jesus knew it would not be easy. It would require not only a willingness to sell his possession, but also to give the money to the poor. The man would be losing not only his things but his influence, his security, and maybe even his identity.

Jesus didn't try to sugar coat the losses that this man would experience. He told his disciples that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to have eternal life. But he also gave them reasons to hope. He told them that what he's asking may be impossible for a person, but it's not impossible for God. For God, nothing is impossible. That's reason to hope.

Jesus also said that in return the man would receive a hundred-fold what he had given away. He would receive a new house, new fields, and even a new family. A new family forms when we enter into a relationship with other followers of Jesus. And that new family can help create a new community, a beloved community.

I have seen this. A number of years ago, I met some Catholic Workers, people who live in voluntary poverty, with the goal of living out the Beatitudes – feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and living a life of non-

violence, advocating for peace and right relationships. Chris and his wife, Jackie, their sons Ammon and Micah, and a friend, Brian are Catholic Workers who have lived in the north end of Hartford for over 25 years. It's an inner city neighborhood which struggles with poverty, crime, and injustice. They rely on donations and volunteers to help them make ends meet.

Both Chris and Jackie had thought about becoming CW's in Hartford before they met. And they decided that this was something they would do together. They got married in a church in Hartford's north end and wanted to establish their Catholic Worker House in that neighborhood. They tried to buy house on the street that was for sale but could not afford it. It sold to someone else. But 1 year later, Chris and Jackie received a call from the bank. The sale had fallen through, the bank was going out of business, and the manager wanted to do something meaningful – to sell the house to Jackie and Chris. The bank agreed to sell them the house for \$10,000. Chris and Jackie believed it was a miracle.

The house had been vacant and needed a total overhaul. Each room needed work. Every window was broken. And during the renovations, which they did with help from others, things were stolen - building supplies, Chris' tools, light bulbs, and even toilet paper. But people in the community responded with help and money. One woman even met Chris at Home Depot and gave him money to replace his tools.

Their plan was to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, give people a place to sleep. But they were new to the block and friendly, so neighborhood children started showing up at their doorstep. The Catholic Workers started after school tutoring, Saturday arts and crafts, and a food pantry. Chris and Jackie realized that the neighborhood kids were the reason they were there. Their home got quite busy with kids all over the place and unexpected guests sleeping in spare beds.

Eventually, they were able to purchase another house next door, from a woman who was no longer able to stay in her home. This increased the good that they could do – more room for a food pantry for the neighbors, more space for kids to come to do homework and art projects, place for a garden to feed and teach the children about healthy eating and cooking, and to offer place to play in the back yard. Theirs was a place of spiritual community building.

The neighborhood kids generally hung out there when they were young. As teens they typically drifted away, which seemed natural. But the teens often drifted to the street and gangs. Then 2 of "their kids," kids who had grown up coming to their house, kids - 14 and 17 years old - were murdered. Chris and Jackie felt awful. They realized they needed way to hold onto teenagers. They installed a basketball court in their back yard. They hired the teens who had been coming to their house to be counselors at a summer camp in Voluntown, CT where they

brought neighborhood youngsters during the summer. At camp, the teen counsellors gained experience as mentors and even got paid.

The Catholic Workers even developed a relationship with Husky Sport program. Student athletes from UConn came to the house – to mentor, teach about nutrition, and help with homework skills. The neighborhood kids visited the UConn campus. They saw athletes and other people of color like them who had made it to college. Role models. All this helped the neighborhood kids want to go to college. Now there is even have a scholarship program.

Catholic Workers recognize the importance of celebrating the positive in that neighborhood. In June, they celebrate everyone's graduation to the next grade and hold up the graduates as role models. Each December they have Christmas party at the Voluntown camp. They bring the kids there by bus from Hartford. Everything is decorated and festive. The kids receive Christmas presents that are donated by individuals and churches.

Chris, Jackie, their sons, and Brian live a commitment to non-violence in neighborhood and beyond. They are committed to "Building a Beloved Community," a world community. They have even had children from Palestine and Iraq stay with them.

There is much more I could say about the Hartford Catholic Workers, but I will finish by telling you about one Saturday when I visited. Young children were running around and laughing. Teens were playing basketball, fixing bicycles and hanging out. Volunteers were spending time with the kids, some from UConn and some who look like you and me.

I had arrived just before circle time; when everyone formed a circle and held hands. Jackie reminded them of the importance of being quiet and respectful to one another. Then, going around the circle, each person said their name and what they were grateful for. I felt humbled to be included. Afterward, everyone lined up for lunch. There was laughter, joy, and a true sense of community – of love and belonging – brown, white and black faces; blond, black, and gray hair; those who lived in that neighborhood and those who visited; rich and poor.

In our gospel this morning, we heard Jesus tell the man that he needed to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor. And that man grieved. He struggled. I know that I struggle with Jesus' words. But Jesus also told his disciples that whoever did this would gain brothers, sisters, houses and land. I call that community.

Well I was deeply moved by the community that I saw that day – one of the love and belonging a neighborhood plagued by poverty, violence, and the effects of systemic racism. I think that if

that man from our scripture reading this had seen the Catholic Worker community and the love that's there, that he might have been moved also.

These Catholic Workers have had my respect and gratitude for all they do. When people speak to Chris and say that they wish they had the courage to do what he has done, he reminds them that the Hartford Catholic Worker House survives with the support of others; the sharing of their time, talent and money – to tutor one kid, to make food, to come and be present to listen, to help pay the bills, and to be their voices in the suburbs. All kinds of talents are needed to build that beloved community.

Jesus told the man who asked what he needed to do to sell his possessions, to give the money to the poor, and then to follow him. And he looked at the man with love. Jesus also said that with God, all things are possible and that the person who follows him will be blessed with more. God's love that makes all things possible. Through the sharing of our blessings with those who are poor, we do God's will and God's love builds Beloved Communities – communities of joy, peace, justice, love and hope.

And Jesus looking at him, loved him. Jesus looking at us, loves us. The love of Jesus makes all things possible.