

Sometimes we're most afraid of what we need the most. It's a great mystery of the heart. Peace and joy and all the other aspects of fullness of life can be right there before us, but instead of embracing them, we back away in fear. We know what we need to do to have more blessed lives, but in the face of the possibility, we're too often like the rich man in today's passage from Mark: we walk away sad.

As a result, we exclude ourselves from the life we not only could have, but that God wants for us. Yes, as Jesus said, it may indeed be hard to enter the kingdom of God, but what happens with this man says that the source of difficulty comes not from Jesus, but from us.

Jesus has just said that "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." Now a rich man, perhaps thinking he has everything else (that's what having great possessions means to some), has the ultimate question for Jesus: "what must I *do* to inherit eternal life?" "What must I *do*?" (The force of the original Greek is much stronger, more like, "What must I pay or accomplish). What must I *do*, *pay* or *accomplish* to inherit eternal life?"

Those words *do*, *pay*, and *accomplish* say a lot about his mind-set. Often typical of the privileged, it contradicts Jesus' teaching. Rather than receiving the kingdom in complete dependence as a child, he wants to know what he can *do* to inherit eternal life. The conflict is present even in his question. You can't *do* anything for an *inheritance*; by definition, it's something you can only be given. But he wants to be able to *do* something, *pay* or *accomplish* something, in order to possess or acquire it.

Jesus increases that tension. He says that if he's seeking the way to life, the best way to start is by keeping the commandments. The man responds that he's kept all the commandments since his youth. You can almost detect his delight. He's done what he needs to do; he's all set.

But then, Jesus actually gives him something more to *do*. Moved by his obedience to the Law, and loving him for it, Jesus tells him how to find what his heart most desires: "Sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

The man's stunned. Jesus says he'll find true life only by doing what seems reckless and crazy – give away all he has. He'll move more deeply into life with God by letting go of what he owns.

But he can't let go! So instead of accepting Jesus' invitation, he "was shocked and went away grieving." A better translation would be, "He was appalled and went away offended."

How telling! Fullness of life is standing right before him, but he can't let go of a lesser good for the sake of a much greater one. So, his life will continue to be less than it could be.

Remember! Just before Jesus deflated the man with his shocking suggestion, Mark says that "Jesus, looking at him, loved him." Love is a way of seeing, and those who love us best see us best. In fact, a better translation might be "looking into him, he loved him." In loving the man, Jesus sees him as he truly is, in a way that he's not yet capable of seeing himself.

Jesus sees his attachment to wealth and possessions. He knows the danger of such attachment. It's not only greed but wealth itself and the virtues that help us acquire it that can be a problem.

Certainly, those who pride themselves on their possessions or expect their material prosperity to provide them ultimate security are sadly mistaken. Yet, even honestly acquired and generously shared wealth is dangerous to our souls, because it prompts us to rely on ourselves rather than God.

That's why it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to "inherit," receive as a gift, the kingdom of God. It's hard to let go of a concrete, obvious basis for security and comfort, and the more we have the harder it gets.

Jesus wants the man to have the life he's looking for, but lets him know that his attachment to what

he owns prevents him from seeing and being who he truly is, and thus from finding it.

Jesus wants him to let go, release his grasp on anything he clings to, open his hands so they can be free to receive the gift God wants to give – life in the Kingdom. The only thing anyone really needs to do, the only thing anyone can do, to “inherit eternal life,” is open up, let go, and receive the gift.

Part of that opening up, that letting go, is giving up any attachment, any pride in our own faith and virtue. Even honestly sought virtue and faith are dangerous, because they prompt us to rely on ourselves rather than God. I’ve already noted a reliance on self implied in the man’s question, “What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?” But the question also implies a *focus* on self, it’s about something for himself, the one more thing he needs, that he’s not yet acquired to make his life full and good.

Entering God’s kingdom will require a change of focus: a shift of focus from himself, even if it’s about his own salvation, toward a focus God and neighbor. And what Jesus tells him to “go and do” indicates that you can’t shift your focus to God without also shifting your focus to neighbor; the two are bound together, you can’t have one without the other.

When we make that shift, we stop worrying, like this rich man, about what we need “to do” and can begin to let God work on our heart, on who we need to become. We can let go of any notion of our salvation as a project we have to work on and simply receive it as a gift God wants to give.

Life in God’s kingdom is about transformation and character change. Whether or not the barrier for us is what it was for this man, whether what we cling to is wealth and possessions, or something else, the thrust of the transformation and character change is always toward caring and sharing.

Throughout Mark’s Gospel, people come to Jesus with all sorts of questions. Each time, he reframes the question in terms of the dawning of God’s kingdom and the new way of being it requires. This time it was to show that eternal life, life in the Kingdom of God, is not something we get, not an object we obtain. It’s the *gift* of life in community with others, a “family” gathered around Jesus.

That’s the rub! To many, community doesn’t seem like a *gift*. Other people can be so disappointing and difficult. It’s hard to think of the possibility, much less the desirability, of being a “family” with them. Trying to be a family may not only be unpleasant but may compromise our spiritual purity. Why does Jesus make life with others such a focus? Why does eternal life, life in God’s kingdom, have to be lived together, with others? Why can’t Jesus’ way be a path we can walk alone?

Wishing it could be, we can come to church to get a spiritual message for ourselves but not get involved with “the family,” we can resist letting go, giving ourselves, our time, talent, or treasure, to sustain its life, ministry, or mission. Like the rich young man, we can view life, even our spiritual life, as a project we accomplish for ourselves, that’s best accomplished by ourselves, because most other people are so flawed and disappointing. That leaves us free to conclude that there’s nothing outside of ourselves worth giving ourselves to, so we might as well keep our time, talent, and treasure, pretty much to ourselves. It’s very seductive, self-serving “spiritual” rationale.

So, how might we hear Jesus’ call, but resist that self-serving temptation, and respond differently? How can we begin to shift our focus away from ourselves and toward God’s kingdom (that has to be shared with a family)?

It’s clear that we have to begin by wanting something more than a few teachings from Jesus that we can take and apply to lives that we’re still living on our own, for ourselves. We have to start by wanting to be with him, in his presence. That’s where he begins the character change that makes us true disciples, by being with him. That’s why he said, “Come, follow me.” And the need to be with

him means that character change is not only a slow process but also a relational one.

That relational process doesn't happen just between "me (or you) and Jesus;" it happens nestled and nurtured in the company of believers. After all, since the resurrection, that's his "body," his physical presence here on earth. And flawed though it may be, that's where we're enabled to take the first steps toward a new way of being. That's why we can't follow Jesus and stay aloof from his people.

The gift they give us, the nurture they provide, isn't just the teaching and support, the love and the care, it's also the challenge of learning to really love, to be patient, to bear faults and weaknesses, to hold accountable and set boundaries with grace and love, to practice forgiveness and reconciliation. In short, to become part of Christ's body, by growing in the spiritual gifts he shared with us.

That leads us to an uncanny connection to today's passage from Hebrews. We can even say that in this story Jesus enacts what Hebrews declares, that "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword," Jesus penetrates into this man's heart, exposes his inner spirit, reveals what is hidden and shows the man to himself in a way that he's never known himself before.

He goes away grieving, but not empty-handed. He's found what he's looking for—knowledge that leads to life. He walks away sad, but not without hope. Though, for now, he's too bound to a false god to take a first step toward fullness of life with the true God, he knows what he needs to do. Will he ever do it? It won't be easy, but, Jesus said, "For God all things are possible."

Whatever we hold on to, are addicted to, or can't let go of in order to follow Jesus, doesn't have to remain a barrier. We can make that hopeful affirmation, not because those idols and addictions may become less powerful or because we may gain new strength to resist them. Our hope isn't those empty options but in Jesus' affirmation, "For God all things are possible."

The disciples saw the man's goodness. They saw how he'd been blessed with wealth. And they heard Jesus' words, "How hard it will be for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!" "Boy," they wonder, "if that guy can't be saved, who can be?" Is there hope for anyone?

But Jesus said there was: "For mortals it's impossible, but not for God, for God all things are possible." Once more he was making it clear to those thick-skulled disciples just how hard it is to change and live out kingdom ethics. Once more he reminded them that hope lay not in what any human can do, but in what only God can do, in what God alone can give.

For them and us, Jesus holds out the hope that with God, change and first steps are not only possible but already happening. That's why he says, "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, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age, and in the age to come eternal life."

They had taken the first step, they were "on the way" with him, together. He calls us to join him, join them, together. It will mean letting go of many things we cling to, it will mean sharing with many we find difficult. We can't do it holding on to anything. We can't do it alone. That's why it's so hard. But we can take the first step. Because, for God all things are possible! Amen.

Gracious God,

For health and wellness, and when there is no cure, for healing, for wholeness, for acceptance,
...so we may bless your name regardless of our fortunes, in all of life's twists and turns
...we praise you and thank you.

For shalom, for the peace that passes understanding and is misunderstood by so many;
...for your righteousness that will be restored when all of creation, all the people, when everything
...finally finds its proper place as you planned and willed, and for which we patiently wait,
...so that all of life, the rocks themselves, the stars, and all nations praise you and give you thanks,
...God of glory!

For hope, for vision, for perspective, and patience,
...knowing as we dare to entrust ourselves to you all will be well,
...that your will shall be done on earth as it is heaven,
...that behold, you make all things new,
...that as we wait with longing for the birth of the new creation we should not faint and grow weary
...before your new world comes to pass,
...so we give you thanks that as we see more deeply and perceive more clearly that this is your world.

In our weakness we come to you.

Your words are hard.

We're hesitant to sacrifice what we want most, trust most, think we need most, for you.

We think of excuses why we should not consider everything as yours, to be used for your reign.

We think of ourselves as owners, instead of stewards.

We pray for your intercession.

We pray for your salvation.

We pray for your help in the many tasks of ministry we share.

We pray for those who do the on-going work of our church, who serve on committees,

...teach Sunday School, sing or play in choirs, provided leadership in many ways,

...that you would bless them with strength and guidance.

We pray for those seek to strengthen our family of faith at the retreat this weekend

...and those who will welcome guests to Bethany Kitchen on Saturday.

We pray that you would move in the hearts of those who have gifts to share but are reluctant,

...so they may be freed to become a more active part in our ministry and mission for you.

Grant us awareness of our own weakness and patience for the weakness of others.

Bear with us a little longer, as we seek to become your family of faith.

We are hampered by the distractions that we have made into idols.

We are too much in awe of bank accounts, stock holdings, pension plans.

We are hemmed in by our planners, our schedules, our electronic toys.

We have taken our tools and served them rather than making serve us in our shared ministry for you.

We pray for your aid in our hour of weakness.

Let us not be like the rich young man walking away in sorrow, as you are in sorrow too.

Instead, may we take up our cross and follow you. Amen.