

Sunday, March 27, 2022

The Right Question

(Series: "The Gospel According to Peter")

(Message Four)

(Mark 10:17-22)

Scripture:

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. (Mark 10:17-22)

Message

Mike Yaconelli was a passionate follower of Jesus, a youth leader, a trainer of youth leaders, the founder of *Youth Specialties*, and the author of *Messy Spirituality*. Mike tells of a church that found itself in an increasingly urban setting. After considerable debate, they hired a young woman to work with local gang members. After just a few weeks she had a group meeting in the church building.

One night she was talking about **Matthew 6:33** ("*But seek first the kingdom...*") and explaining that if you want to be a disciple of Jesus, nothing can be more important than Jesus. Her words were, "if the gang is more important than Jesus, then the gang has to go. If your girlfriend is more important than Jesus, then she has to go."

One gang member was so into what she was saying he threw his arms back and said, "Wow! (He didn't actually say, "wow," but the three letter word is probably better to say in church than the four-letter word he used.) It's hard to be a disciple" and his hand broke a window. The church leaders found out and were very upset about paying \$26 (it's an old story) to get the window fixed. They put the gang members on restriction and said they couldn't meet

in the church for a month.

(Mike Yaconelli writes, “*What? Is this church crazy? Anyone who can teach gang members to understand what Jesus meant is one great teacher!*”)

A few weeks after the restriction lifted, the pastor popped into the Bible study to talk with them for a few minutes. After he left, one guy said, “I like that guy. Let’s go to church Sunday!” The youth leader planned for them to sit in the balcony rather than with the congregation downstairs. When the minister got up and announced (and explained) the passing of the peace, a gang member stood up in the balcony and yelled, “Hey, dude, you’re cool!” The entire congregation turned around in shock. After the service, the youth leader was told not to bring them to church again until they learned how to behave.”

(Mike Yaconelli writes: “*What? The congregation should have turned around and yelled, “We think you guys are cool too. Why don’t you come down here with us!”* Mike writes, “*They should have given the youth leader a raise. They didn’t. She was fired.*”)

Sadly, even people with the best of intentions often get things quite messed up – not unlike the man in our Scripture today...

THE MAN

There are **several things we know about this man that endears him to us.**

This young man (Matthew tells us he is young; **19:22**) wants to live intensely, deeply, passionately - the kind of life that **lasts**, one that makes a **difference**. He doesn’t want to live a wasted, frivolous, trivial life. He is eager, enthusiastic, in a hurry, running to Jesus to get his spiritual question answered. We like him. When he kneels before Jesus to ask his question, we realize his sense of urgency.

This man has lived a good life. He has lived a **moral** life. He was not a rebellious youth; he has been faithful to his wife; he has been honest in his business dealings; he has been a good neighbor.

He has made a **good** living (Mark says he had great wealth; **10:22**). He is young and already wealthy with much of his entire life still ahead.

But something is **missing – or he wouldn’t be coming to Jesus for help.** Somehow his moral track record and years of prosperity have left his soul empty and his spirit dry. He can’t imagine that this is all there is to life. He intuitively understands there has to be something more...and he longs for it!

He pursued moral excellence. How come moral excellence doesn’t provide a sense of deep satisfaction and a strong self-image. He pursued wealth and

possessions. Aren't material blessings supposed to be a sign of God's favor and blessing?

Even with his influence (power) (Matthew says he is a *ruler*; **19:22**), wealth, and moral character, he realizes something is missing in his life. He realizes his heart and soul are unsettled; that he needs to be preparing for his "future" – and so he is searching...

People pursue power, happiness and success their entire life and still come up empty. People invest deeply in this life and fail to prepare for their eternal destiny.

(I can just hear Mike Yaconelli say, "*What? Are they nuts? Why would anyone invest so deeply in this life which lasts for only a few years and spend little or no time investing in their eternity? That makes no sense.*")

OUR GOD

The man asks the right question: "*Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*"

It is a good question; in fact, it is the fundamental question. We intuitively understand that this life we are living has something to do with the next life, with our hope of being able to live forever. But this is not only the fundamental eternal life question, but this is also the fundamental daily life question: What is this life really all about? Where is its meaning, its purpose, its joy?

He asks the right person; he asks Jesus. Not everyone with a spiritual interest or question does. It is not uncommon today for people to turn to Tarot cards, astrology, new age seminars, Transcendental Meditation, Buddhism, or Scientology. In Jesus' day, there were also lots of options. This young man could have gone to the Pharisees, to Sadducees, to Zealots, to other rabbis, to a myriad of Roman or Greek temples and their gods scattered throughout Palestine.

But this man comes to a rabbi – a rabbi who taught with authority and who was already unpopular with the religious leaders.

Jesus responds to his inquiry: "***Why do you call me good? No one is good—except God alone.***" Jesus' response is not harsh; it simply lays the foundation for what is ahead...

(First) Jesus is inquiring about the man's **teachability**: "*Why do you call me good?*"

The man brought up the issue when he opened his question with "*Good teacher...*," so Jesus is asking about his willingness to learn, to investigate, to follow, to change. In order to follow Jesus, we have to be willing to walk in the

dust of our rabbi. Jesus is asking if he is willing.

(Second) Jesus is inquiring about his potential **obedience**: “*You know the commandments, right?*”

Jesus is asking if he has counted the cost of obedience into his question. He responds without hesitation: “*I have always kept all the commandments.*” It is interesting that Jesus never challenges or disputes his answer; his obedience will be tested shortly.

(Third) Jesus is inquiring about who this man thinks he’s **talking** to: “*Only God is good.*”

“If you know that only God is good and you are calling me good, are you acknowledging that I am God?” Jesus is asking the man if he sees him [Jesus] as God, because the issue of eternal life rests solely in Jesus. That is, the answer to the man’s question is standing right in front of him! Recognizing Jesus is God, the author of eternal life, is the first step, the foundational step, of what we must “do” to inherit eternal life. Everything hinges on recognizing Jesus.

As Peter’s spokesperson, it is Mark’s challenge to make it as clear as possible that when we are connecting with **Jesus**, we are dealing first-hand, directly, with **God**. Jesus, God-incarnate, is living the God-life in the same world in which we are living.

Jesus literally provides the words and presence of God; he offers all that is life-affirming and life-restoring as we ask him our questions and listen to his answers; he, and he alone, offers eternal life.

Jesus **listens** to him; Jesus **loves** him; Jesus **answers** him. But having been listened to, having been loved, having been answered, he walks away slowly and sorrowfully.

(Mike Yaconelli would run after him and say, “*What? Don’t walk away! You’re making a big mistake! Don’t leave! Maybe you didn’t hear him right; maybe you didn’t understand correctly; maybe you didn’t realize who you were talking to. Come back and listen again!*”)

There is something missing in your life – or your face wouldn’t cloud over like it did. You will not find hope or joy on the path you’re currently traveling; don’t walk away!

But he does. We are left to wonder how many people – even here this morning - have heard God speak, have come face to face with God’s love, and have walked away.

WHAT'S MISSING?

*“Jesus looked at him and **loved** him...”* Out of his love, the love of God, Jesus tells the young man what he needs to hear: *“One thing you lack...go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come follow me” (10:21).*

Jesus’ “look” is an invitation to leave his comfort zone and join the adventure of following Jesus.

What does this young man lack? He lacks the freedom to **enjoy** who he is and who he can be, to love and be loved.

The one who came to Jesus has diligently practiced morality – but for its own sake; he is only capable of not doing evil; he has not been able to do good. He has found no joy in right living.

He has accumulated wealth and possessions; but they own him more than he owns them. They have piled up and squeezed him into a tiny space with little room to enjoy them.

He has been going through the motions of life, but he longs for a sense of **completeness**, connection and **community**. He longs for a purpose and a reason to live.

So, Jesus answers him: “*Sell all that you have and give to the poor, then come follow me.*”

Selling everything he has and giving to the poor will remove the **millstone** of his possessions from around his neck; following Jesus will **address** of his obsessive-compulsive morality. Placing his focus on morality and possessions in a new light – that is, in a **new** personal God-**relationship** with Jesus Christ–will make all the difference in his life.

Now, the initial question Jesus asked is back: Are you teachable (Will you listen)? Will you be obedient (Will you do what I said)? Do you know who you are talking with (Will you commit your life to him)? These are the questions of discipleship.

Please understand God has nothing against **morality**. Actually, he is in **favor** of and deeply committed to it! Christianity is the most moral religion the world has ever experienced. The revelation Moses received on Mt. Sinai, the litmus test of morality around the world, penetrates the heart of every action.

Moral means that everything can be used for someone’s good or for someone’s evil, can be used to bring life or hasten death, can help others or hurt them deeply. *Moral* means nothing is **neutral**; it means everything either benefits or betrays; everything is either positive or negative. *Moral* means that

nothing exists apart from its purpose, apart from the will that prompts it.

All **work** is moral. All **power** is moral. All our interactions are moral. They either build up or tear down. All our actions, feelings, and thoughts become either creative or destructive when combined with our intentions or motivation. Our intentions are shaped by our love or lack of it, by our worldview, by who or what we call “Lord.”

The **danger**, however, is to simply reduce Christianity –or our relationship with God – to good, **moral behavior**. Living a “god life” doesn’t provide eternal life.

Please understand God has **nothing** against wealth or possessions. In fact, he is in **favor** of them. Christianity is the most material religion the world has ever experienced.

Beginning with creation, we have been told that **matter** is *good*; God **created** it; God **redeems** it. In fact, God came in the human flesh of Jesus of Nazareth to redeem the creation that had been tainted by sin.

When Jesus tells the man to sell his possessions, it’s not because there is something is wrong with possessions (if there were something wrong with possessions, it would just as wrong for the poor person to have them). Jesus tells this man to sell his possession because Jesus knows the **danger** and distraction possessions and wealth are when they get in the way of our love **relationships** with God and with each other. In just a few verses Jesus will say, *“It is harder for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for some who is rich to enter the kingdom of God”* (**Mark 10:26**).

If wealth and possessions start clogging the channels for the flow of our love, then they need to be set aside, a.s.a.p. *“Sell them,”* Jesus says. If you can’t use them as gifts to express your and God’s love, if they get in the way of loving your neighbor, if they detour you from following Jesus – the only option is to get rid of them.

(Mike Yaconelli might say, *“Dude. You’re not happy with the way things are going. You find no joy as you look to your future. Why not try something totally different? What do you have to lose? Don’t leave – embrace the wisdom. Don’t walk away from his love!”*)

THE KEY

What is the key sentence in this story? The answer: *“Jesus looked at him hard in the eye and **loved** him”* (**10:21**).

The key sentence in every story that involves meeting Jesus is *“Jesus loves you.”* The fact that God is love is basic to understanding everything in our salvation-faith life. God is never impersonal; he is love to the core. Jesus loves

this young man – not only enough to listen to him and answer his question, but enough to be nailed to a cross and die for him.

Without this sentence, nothing that follows makes sense; without knowing that Jesus loves us, nothing in this world makes sense or provides meaning. Jesus loves us and he is setting the stage for what will follow...

What is the key command in this story? (Actually, there are two.)

First: “**Sell** everything you have and **give** to the poor.” And then, after you have let go of your identity that’s attached to your *stuff* and your *goodness*, then “**Come**, follow me.”

I wonder if the young man ever heard the second command. A lot of people only hear bits and pieces about who Jesus is and what he says. But this second command is even more important than the first.

Jesus invites this young man and each one of us to be his **companion**, his disciple, to receive an unconditional **love** not based on our being good or keeping the rules, and to receive untold riches and **treasures** not based on our wealth or accumulation of possessions.

Jesus flips the focus: “*I have told you what to do. Now let me do something for you. I love you, so let me give you back your soul, your heart, your life, your assurance of eternity. Let me reveal to you who God made you to be...just follow me.*”

What is the key message in this story?

Here it is: Everything Jesus says and everything Jesus does has this as its foundation: **Jesus loves you** (us) *just as you* (we) *are*. Eugene Peterson says, “*Love is the most comprehensive and intimate relational term in the English language.*” Jesus is love to the core. There is nothing you can do to make Jesus love you more; there is nothing you can do that will make Jesus love you less.

With this assurance and foundation, Jesus invites us to join him as we walk through life – to follow him, and experience his love in our daily life, work, family, in our joys and sorrows.

There is something in this story that seems particularly relevant to us as Americans. Over the last fifty years, the church culture in America has changed dramatically. We have gone from trying to **follow** Jesus to wanting to **get something from** Jesus.

The promotions that encourage people to go/come to church these days are almost entirely framed in consumer language: it will change your life; it will bring you happiness, make you will more successful...

Most people today flock to church to get something. Pre-pandemic, we had churches in America springing up of twenty to thirty thousand members. We

want an orator in our pulpit, soft seats in our sanctuary, programs designed to meet our needs, a bigger and better church than the one down the street.

Churches today compete with other churches for the decreasing group who call themselves Christians. People today go where they can get what they want (i.e., where they can have it their way! I blame Burger King ☺). We are consumers first and disciples last.

The truth we are often hesitant to admit is that Jesus does not always meet our **expectations** or requests; he doesn't always **give** us what we ask for or think we need. Our prayers are not always answered *our way*. When he doesn't, we feel **abandoned**, let down, **disappointed**. Not every decision by church leadership will be what we want. When it isn't, we often feel ignored, frustrated and upset - so we try another church that will hopefully give us more of what we want and ask for.

But here is the Gospel: not every **Gospel** story is a "**success**" story. Some, perhaps even a lot of people, who come to Jesus don't **get** what they **want**, don't hear what they want to hear. Some get irritated and angry; others just walk away sadly – as the one in our story did.

A lot of people come to Jesus, to God, assuming, hoping, he will put the finishing touches on their well-lived and industrious life. They want God's assistance, but they still want to remain in charge of their own decisions and destiny.

God says it doesn't work that way. He calls us to be **teachable** – because we have a lot to learn; he calls us to be **obedient** – because we show our love to him by our obedience; he calls us to recognize Jesus as **Lord** and follow him – because if we don't, we'll never get where we long to go.

In his love, Jesus knows what is going on (with the man in the story and with us). Jesus sees how the man's moral obsessiveness has turned into self-righteousness. He sees how the man's riches are slowing strangling his life. Because he loves this man, Jesus invites him to something different – to let God be God and to let his love be the center of his life.

Jesus still does that. He knows your **heart**. He sees deep into your **soul**. He knows what you **need** to live life abundantly and joyfully. He doesn't say the same thing to everyone, but he does want the same thing for each of us. He wants us to know his love and to follow him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

The story is told of a man who wanted to find God. He was sent to a wise who took him down to the river. The wise man suddenly pushed the man's head under the water, and, in spite of the man's desperate struggle held it under water for what seemed like an eternity. When the wise man pulled his

head above the surface he was gasping for air. The wise man said, “When you desire God as much as you wanted to breathe, you will find him.”

How much do you want to **know God**? How much do you love God? Eternal life requires more than just coming to Jesus; it requires **following** Jesus. That is, going where Jesus goes. Doing what Jesus does. Setting aside our goals, dreams, ideas and opinions for his.

It is relatively easy to discern those who are following Jesus. It is not what they are **not doing** (murdering, committing adultery, stealing, lying, etc.) but by what they are **doing** (giving to the poor, obeying the teachings of Jesus, walking in Jesus’ footsteps, etc.).

Will you, like Peter, express you’re love for Jesus – not once, not twice, but for a lifetime? (cf. **John 21:15f**)

(Mike Yaconelli, who is already with Jesus, would say, “*What! This is a no brainer. Why would you even hesitate? Anyone who loves you as much as Jesus does is worth giving your life too! Decide today; decide your forever right now! Giving your life to Jesus and following him is the best thing you can ever do!*”)

Jesus **loves** you. Jesus is **looking** and **listening** for you. Jesus is **awaiting** your answer!

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