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Pentecost 23B
Peace, Seattle
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Mark 10

UNTAMABLE WORDS

Sometimes, it seems to me, the Jesus we meet in Mark's gospel just needs a vacation.

In one episode after another during his relentless push toward Jerusalem his responses to life's deepest questions startle us, confuse us, and leave us gasping for air.

- Four weeks ago he gave Peter hell when Peter proved ignorant about where the road they were on would take them.
- And two weeks back he said the price of sinning should be paid in the currency of eyes and limbs. YIKES!
- And today he's at it again, turning convention on its head by claiming that the surest indicator of divine blessing—i.e. wealth—is actually a curse that will keep us from entering eternal life!
- No sliding scale, no middle class exemption, no allowance for a fixed income, just the blanket statement: IT'S EASIER FOR A CAMEL TO GO THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE THAN FOR A WEALTHY MAN TO ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

Do you see what I mean? There's no wiggle room whatsoever with that kind of rhetoric!

TEACHER, the man says, sincerely enough. WHAT MUST I DO TO INHERIT ETERNAL LIFE? I'VE CHECKED OFF ALL THE BOXES, ACQUIRED ALL THE DEGREES, ASCENDED EVERY LADDER, JUMPED THROUGH EVERY HOOP. IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE I NEED TO DO?

> JUST ONE THING MORE, GO SELL WHAT YOU OWN, GIVE THE MONEY TO THE POOR…THEN COME FOLLOW ME."

Would any of us here respond to Christ's invitation differently? Not I, I'm afraid.

This is the only story recorded in the gospels where someone is directly invited by Jesus to follow him, and then walks away—and the reason is money.

A friend told me recently of a former prison chaplain who had returned to the parish. After speaking at a pastoral conference, a colleague commented:

> THAT JAIL MINISTRY YOU SERVED, IT MUST OF HAVE BEEN QUITE A CHALLENGE COMPARED TO THE PARISH MINISTRY YOU'RE IN NOW.

To which he replied,

> ACTUALLY THE OPPOSITE IS TRUE. IN PRISON MINISTRY THE NEEDS OF MY CONGREGATION WERE SO CLEAR AND EVIDENT. CONGREGATIONAL MINISTRY IS MUCH HARDER, BECAUSE THEY NEED FOR NOTHING.

Lest we find somewhere in this story a loophole we think we can slip through, let's imagine for a moment that rich man, after hearing Jesus' demand, taking a big gulp and then saying:

> **"Okay, Jesus. I'll do it. You are asking a lot of me, Jesus, but if that is what it takes to be saved, I'll do it."**

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Now what? Does Jesus embrace the man, and say, "Welcome!" I'm not so sure.

More likely, perhaps, Jesus says, "That's great. But there is one more thing you also must do. You must climb the highest mountain." The man replies, "I'LL DO IT."
And Jesus says, "You must cure AIDS in your lifetime." "I'LL GIVE IT MY BEST SHOT."
And Jesus says, "You must jump to the moon." "NOW, COME ON! I CAN'T DO THAT!"

And ***now*** Jesus smiles, embraces the man, and says, **"Now we talk. Now we know your limits.** Now we know what you cannot do. Let me tell you about what God has already done for you."

The point, of course, is that if a saving relationship with God is going to happen for us it's not going to be because of what we manage to do.[1] That's the world's paradigm, but not God's.

If a saving relationship with God is going to happen, it won't be because we've reached our good deed quotas, have become tithers, go to church each week, or are successful at climbing ladders.

If a saving relationship with God is going to happen, it's because a power beyond us, outside of us, desires our salvation more than anything, *longs* for our reconciliation, and has been willing to trade his own life freely and fully so that relationship can be made whole.

There is but One who can accomplish for us what we cannot accomplish for ourselves: Jesus, the crucified and risen one.

> For the love of Christ urges us on, says St. Paul, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. [2 Cor. 5:14-15]

There's a little detail in Mark's telling of this story, a detail not found in Matthew or Luke.
It's sandwiched between the lines at the beginning of verse 21:

> ***"Jesus, looking at him, loved him."***

It is this Jesus—who loves us too deeply to leave us clinging to that which will not bring us life—
it is this Jesus who probes the edge of our limitations…and then calls us to step beyond them.

It's an impossible task, of course.

- Stepping beyond what we know to be true about ourselves and the world.
- Stepping beyond the safe harbors we've fashioned for our security.
- Stepping beyond our fears and our doubts, beyond whatever would block us from following him.

Yes, FOR HUMAN BEINGS, IT IS IMPOSSIBLE, BUT NOT FOR GOD.

Today Jesus looks upon us, as he looked upon the rich man, and *loving us*, he invites us unto a journey that begins with trusting him, stepping out, and letting go.

> **That journey begins right here at this table. And you're invited.**

Jesus calls to us: COME FOLLOW ME. And now, we have to decide:
Is this invitation a burdensome command? Or is it a gracious promise?
Amen.

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[1] See Scott Suskovic, *Questions for Jesus, Studies in Mark,* Leader Session Guide. Augsburg Fortress, 2009, p. 29.