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The Stuff That Is In the Way

Mark 10:17-31, NRSV, emended

As Jesus 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?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You 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.' "The man said to Jesus, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Jesus, 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." Upon hearing this the man was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus turned around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to come into the Reign of God!" The disciples were perplexed at these words; but Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the Reign of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter into God's Reign." They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God. For God all things are possible."

Peter began to say to Jesus, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus 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 the sake of the gospel, who 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. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

This doesn't seem like the kind of week where we're going to walk away very satisfied—not unlike the rich man in today's gospel story. Admittedly, most of us would deny the idea that we're rich. We're...“comfortable,” we might say. “Saving for a rainy day.” “Able to be generous.” But, in terms of the global population, we are all rich. And, as theologian David Bentley Hart wrote in [an opinion piece](#) for the New York Times in 2017, “the New Testament’s condemnations of personal wealth are fairly unremitting and remarkably stark.” He writes further, “While there are always clergy members and theologians swift to assure us that the New Testament condemns not wealth but its abuse, not a single verse...confirms the claim.” I don't think we're going to get out of this one easily, Beloved. The point of the gospel is to set us—all of us—free, and, in that case, our stuff, our wealth will always hold us in bondage.

Jesus's conversation with the person we generally call "the Rich Young Man" ...it's a packed conversation, and the devil—well, maybe the gospel, I'm not sure...whatever it is—it's in the details. Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem. Where he was once wandering from town to town, now, there is a directness to his route, and he is clear with his disciples that they are headed not just to Jerusalem, but to Golgotha, to the cross. Every word Mark writes in this gospel makes abundantly clear that the lens for understanding all of it is the cross and the resurrection, always Good Friday and Easter Sunday. So, that's the scene. They're on their way to the cross. And, while they are on their way, a man comes up, "Good teacher," he says, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The question says everything - it is, essentially, asking for a checklist. Just tell me what I have to do, Jesus, and I'll do it. Tell me what I have to do to be good. Boy, do I get that question. If Jesus would just *tell* us, it would be so much easier. It is the plea behind our words every time we try to use the phrase, "Scripture says" as a stopper in a debate, pretending that the contradiction isn't just a few pages away. If only God would just *tell* us what to do to be good. Hmm, Jesus replies, I think you might be missing the point. God is good. People are people.

Even so, Jesus sizes him up - his lavish robes, jewelry, perhaps, his accent or lack thereof - and then Jesus verifies that this wealth hasn't been made in sinful ways. He didn't kill someone for it, take it dishonestly; he wasn't like the prodigal son of Luke's gospel, wasting away his inheritance while his parents were still living. And the man is all, "sure," "yes," that he kept the law, that he *was* a good Jew, that's why he's come to the good teacher. We, too, have made our way honestly, through hard work and perseverance, which function as law in our day. But if we so much as glance in our rearview mirror, we might see that the we've polluted the road we're on. We might see the real, bodily cost of everything we've ever gotten cheap—the dollar store "steals," the fast fashion, the lithium ion batteries that fuel every electronic we own—each of these with a high human cost (what does that phrase even mean, really?). Just like the young rich man, we've checked all the boxes, but we don't have to dig very far to start finding problems. Like the young, rich man, we stare at Jesus, expectantly. In our heart's we're probably hoping to hear what he's said in parables: "Well done, good and faithful servant." But that is not what we're going to get. Jesus tells him something that is hard—no, check that, Jesus tells him something that is impossible: give it all away. But, before that, and this is what it says, I'm not paraphrasing, Jesus looked at him, and Jesus loved him. Jesus tells the rich young man something impossible, but, first, *Jesus loves him*.

Make no mistake, I know who I am in this story. I am this rich young person, grasping tightly to my self-righteousness in one hand and my all my stuff in the other. And when Jesus tells him to give it all away, I, too, am positively stricken. I know how much I have: the brimming cabinets, the bulging closets, the collections of bric-a-brac, this or that squirreled away for a rainy day, for a disaster. And more: the future I'm hoping for my children, the travel I'm planning, the retirement I hope to one day have. How can I give it all away? And, the disciples, those scoundrels who have, yes, left behind their family, by

which they mean they literally left their old man in the boat, alone. To their self-assured comment, Jesus promises it all back, but, yes, with a hefty side of persecutions. No wonder they *all* walk away sad, eventually. After all, who is left in the end to witness the cross, the resurrection, which Jesus keeps saying it is all about? Who is left to witness Jesus's self-giving love?

Well, that's just the thing. Who is left? At the end, it is the women, the children, the crippled, the blind, the deaf, the demon-possessed. Those who have nothing and so stand to gain everything. The first witnesses of the cross, whose tongue is tied in fear. Who will hear their message when they say "I am finally free!" Is this not what we might hear when we give it all away?

I don't know, because I can't do it. But surely Jesus knew this man would not give it away, could not leave it behind, could not lift this cross, and yet Jesus loved him still. This rich young man is the only person in Mark's gospel that Jesus calls to follow and who refuses to do so. And this is the only place in Mark's gospel where it says that Jesus loves a person. This man didn't measure up—not even close. Jesus lists some of the commandments, some of the laws, but leaves out the few the man clearly didn't follow - coveting, idolatry. This man is not good—not good enough, not by a long shot. He is not good, but God alone is good. He cannot love, but God is love. He cannot give it all away, but God gives up everything for him, for us, for the universe.

I don't say this to tidy everything up and get us off the hook, Beloved. We are bound to our stuff, and our riches will stand between us and the fullest understanding of the gospel. We depend on our wealth to save us, as if that rainy day or disaster is the worst thing that could befall us. And while we are worried about what may only be a bad dream, our neighbor is *living their worst nightmare*. We have the opportunity to set them free, and experience release ourselves, but we remain bound, and so does our neighbor. The gospel is meant to set us free, together with all God made, it is what we were made to depend on, and as long as we depend on our stuff, our status, our wealth, we remain bound. What we have will always stand in our way. There isn't an easy answer here, because this is a text we are meant to wrestle with for our entire lives. Jesus is obtuse here, but he still makes clear that the law—the thing that binds us—will often put us in impossible situations. Impossible situations to choose the good. Impossible situations to do what is right. Spend time volunteering or time with your teen? Save for the future or be generous today? Do we help domestically or internationally? House people or feed them? Save bodies or save souls? These are impossible situations for us, but not for God.

What then, does God really ask of us? Are we supposed to give it all away? Yes. Will we be able to do that? No. It is impossible for us.

And so we do the only faithful thing we can do, we wrestle with the text, squeeze from it every drop of Good News. We sometimes give and give and give until it is a sacrifice that for a millisecond might mirror God's own benevolence and self-giving love. And when

we fail—and we will fail time and time again, Beloved—we return to the foot of the cross, we repent, we await the resurrection dawn and we rise again.

We wrestle, and, Beloved, we trust. We do not know the shape of the kin-dom of God—how there can be enough for everyone, how everyone will be free of these systems that bind us, how the least can become great—but we trust that it will be so. We trust that God alone is good, that God's promises are sure, and, though life be wrenched away, the kin-dom's ours forever.

Amen.