

20th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 23—Year B

Mark 10:17-31

October 10, 2021

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Taking that first step. We've all done it, at various times in our lives—whether it is the first step we take on our own without the gentle hand of a parent guiding us, walking into a new classroom at school, going out on that first date, leaving the corporate job to set up our own business, or saying “yes” to the doctor’s advice about undergoing experimental treatment for a life-threatening illness. We all know as well that, while those first steps can be exciting and invigorating, they can also be nerve-wracking, painful, and very difficult. However we feel about it, the nature of that first step is that we leave behind what is known and comfortable and we step forward in hope that, while we are not sure what lies ahead, those risky first steps will lead us into a brighter future that holds much promise for us.

In today’s gospel lesson Jesus recommends to a man seeking his advice that he take just such a first step into the unknown future. In the gospel of Matthew, this man is described as young, and in the gospel of Luke he is portrayed as a ruler, but Mark depicts him as just a regular guy, albeit one with great possessions.

From all appearances, this man has everything. And yet, he knows that something is indeed missing from his life. Scripture tells us that he RUNS to Jesus and KNEELS at his feet, seeking an answer to the void in his life. In the gospel of Mark, just about everyone who kneels before Jesus is sick and in need of healing. In other stories, it is a leper, Jairus, whose daughter is dying, the woman who is hemorrhaging. And now this rich man, who has followed all the laws and wants for nothing, kneels before Jesus. He, along with every lottery winner, perhaps has learned that having all the money in the world doesn’t solve every problem. Maybe he has learned that one can lose oneself by being the smartest, or the most beautiful, or the one with the most toys. This man, lost, desperate, and heartsick, comes to Jesus in order to be healed. He blurts out the question that is burning within him, *“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”*

Jesus knows the heart of this man. He looks on him, and, as our text tells us, does not judge this man, but LOVES him, instead. He tells him that he does, indeed, lack one thing. And that one thing is for him to go and sell all he has and give the money to the poor. Apparently, this is not the answer the man expects, for he walks away in shock and grief. We may assume that he goes away grieving because he is

UNWILLING to sell all that he has, give the money to the poor, and follow Jesus. And yet, perhaps he goes away grieving PRECISELY because he HAS decided to follow Jesus, meaning he will sell everything! Taking that first step in a new direction would not be without emotion. It would be a decisive step into the future, a step requiring a radical letting go of all that he has—not only possessions but also the relationships and status that go with them. We just don't know.

But what we do know is that Jesus knows this man's heart, and he knows OUR hearts, as well. He knows how hard it is for us to change, to let go of the familiar past and present and step forward into the unknown ahead of us. He knows how hard it is for us to walk into that first AA meeting, to entertain longtime friends for the first time following a spouse's death, to pick up the phone to call a marriage counselor, to confront a child about the drugs we found in his room. He knows how hard it is for us to leave behind whatever possesses us—the hurts and wrongs done to us, the feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem, the failure to recognize that we ARE enough, and are loved by God, no matter what.

Jesus wants more for us than our present lives provide us. He wants us to bask in our greatest treasure, His very presence, which neither rust nor moth can consume. He wants us to experience the life-giving freedom that his kingdom offers. For Jesus offers us the same kingdom life he offered the wealthy man. This kingdom is a kingdom not of this world, but of God's—a kingdom where everything we know is turned upside down, where the powerful are humbled and the powerless are lifted up, where the first shall be last and the last shall be first. This is a kingdom filled with God's unwavering love for all.

If it were left up to us, those first steps toward God's kingdom would be impossible. But, thankfully, it isn't up to us, for in taking those steps for us to the cross, in dying and then being raised from the dead to new life, Christ has accomplished the impossible for us. He has brought us back into relationship with God by pulling us, along with all the camels in the world, through the eye of a needle into God's kingdom!

In and through the waters of baptism and the meal of Holy Communion, the risen Christ invites us to come into His presence, once and for all and, yet, over and over again. In and through the power of the Holy Spirit, the risen Christ enables us to take the first steps into new patterns of thought and behavior—into forgiving those who have wronged and hurt us, into seeing ourselves and others as being equally valued in the eyes of God, into sharing our God-given abundance with the hurting and broken world around us. Thanks be to God there is no needle too small, no eye too tiny, through which the grace of God cannot pull us. Amen!