

“To Be Alive”

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on October 14, 2018

Based on Mark 10:17-27

I will begin with some reflections from a young woman who is about to turn 30 years old ... in her own words ...

I had wanted to greet the age of 30 at the door of my very own house, wearing a sleeveless linen dress and holding a glass of pinot noir. “Please, come in,” I’d say, and smile warmly. “I’ve been expecting you.” Thirty and I would glide across my pristine hardwood floors, sit down on the couch, and laugh together over the worst parts of my life. As we rehashed each devastating incident, all the pain would miraculously be gone, replaced by a calm acceptance and quiet thankfulness.

“I’m glad all that’s behind me,” I would say, pouring myself another glass of wine. I turn thirty in a few months. The reality is: I rent an apartment. I look awful in dresses, and until I lose thirty pounds, sleeves are an absolute necessity. My hardwood floors are scarred and spotted with suspicious dark patches. Sometimes I take photos of the patches, to make sure they aren’t getting bigger.

I have no master plan. I worry. I get depressed. I am anxious much of the time. I wish I could earn a living and still manage to exercise, eat vegetables, be creative, practice yoga, meditate, volunteer, socialize, relax. At the very least, I’d like to be able to get up when my alarm goes off. Why do I drink so much, when it gives me such bad headaches? When am I finally going to switch careers? Why, after I’ve spent so many years in therapy, can one call from my mother send me into a weeklong depression?

Being a young adult in this world is no easy thing. The text this morning is the story of another young person who is also struggling. This fellow shows up in all three gospels which may be an indication that his story is based on a true meeting, although most of us wish this fellow had never shown up at all.

Because of him we have one of the hardest sayings in the Bible, one that makes us gulp whenever we hear it. “Go sell what you own; give it to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Yes, and then come and follow me.”

Mark doesn’t say right off that the man is rich. But we can guess. It’s not because he has good manners, running up and kneeling at Jesus’s feet, or because he addresses Jesus so grandly once he gets there – “Good teacher” is what he calls him. But rather, it’s because of the question he asks. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

It's a rich man's question, posed by someone whose bills are paid, whose income is secure, someone who is not preoccupied by lesser questions such as, "Where can I find a job?" or "How can I feed my family?" -- questions that plagued so many people in Jesus's day. This man is free of those particular concerns. He doesn't have to spend his days trying to make ends meet. No, he is free to pursue the good life, secure in the knowledge that he is one of God's blessed people

That is one of the things that wealth meant in his day. In the Old Testament, bestowing wealth on people was seen as God's way of freeing them from the daily grind in order to focus on study of scripture and thoughts about God. So this man approaches Jesus with no shame about his great possessions. If anything, they are his credentials, the very things that give him the right to ask his questions in the first place.

But Jesus isn't impressed. Looking down at the man kneeling before him, he sees someone who is a member of the elite class in every way and who works hard to stay there. He's someone who wants to achieve as much in heaven as he has achieved on earth and who will do whatever is required of him to add eternal life to the long list of his achievements. Maybe he hopes he will be asked to buy sandals for every man, woman, and child in Palestine who have none. He sees himself as an extraordinary man worthy of an extraordinary assignment, but Jesus will not cooperate.

"You know the commandments," Jesus says, and reels off half of them. "Do not do this, do not do that. Honor your father and mother." Like any Jewish boy who has the wherewithal to have been to Hebrew School, the fellow can recite these too, and all the rest. But he wants something to set him apart. He wants something he can **do**.

"Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth," the man says --- and we're told, Jesus loves him, just like that -- which may be proof that the man did not answer him pompously or impatiently. He said it, instead, like a confession: "I have kept the commandments all my life, which is how I know that keeping them isn't really enough."

"Yes, and I have made a lot of money, which is why I know that that isn't enough either. I am a rich man -- rich in things, rich in respectability, rich in doing my best to be obedient to God, which is why I know that none of those things is enough to give me the life I want, or make me feel good about the life I have, either. So, Jesus, what do I have to do to inherit eternal life -- a life I can be satisfied with?"

No wonder it says Jesus loves him. The man is sick of being a good boy in an effort to please his parents -- sick of being religious in a way that feels phony to him now on the verge of turning 30. He is ripe and ready for God. He is speaking Jesus's language -- the Jesus who is suspicious of anyone who wears his religion like a long white robe to impress other people.

The fellow has tried hard, but he has come to the end of believing that being pious or rich can save him – meaning, make him feel fully alive. He’s fully invested, and look, the stock market is tanking. All that is left for him is to humble himself in front of the man who he senses can relieve him of the burden of being religious. That’s not going to get him into heaven and he knows it.

So there they are, the two of them and Jesus looks at him – really looks at him, and he loves what he sees – a true honest seeker.

But Jesus does more than look at this man, he looks *into* him, deeply like a doctor making a diagnosis. He looks inside of him to see what his problem is, and what the right medicine might be to heal him. He looks at him with as much compassion as he has ever had for the blind, or the deaf, or the lost, or the lonely. And he aches now to make him whole. So he chooses his words with ultimate care.

“You lack one thing only,” he says, and hearing that, I imagine the man’s heart leapt with hope. At last! Someone who sees past what he owns to what he lacks and who will now help him find that one piece of the jigsaw puzzle of life that he is missing. Whatever it is, he will do it. Whatever it costs, he will pay it.

He will do whatever it takes to add the prize of eternal life to his treasury, only it turns out that this will not be a matter of addition but of subtraction. “Go, *sell* what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.” Jesus says this to him tenderly – his eyes locked on his. “Then, come and follow me.”

Barbara Brown Taylor says, “It is a rich prescription for a rich man a challenge to him to become a new creature, defined in a new way, to trade-in all the words that have described him up to now – wealthy, committed, cultured, responsible, educated, powerful, obedient, -- to trade them all in for one radically different word, which is the word, *free*.”

Let me ask you, what words apply to you – what virtues do you have that have grown a little stale over the years? Well educated? Esteemed? Up-and-coming? If you can come up with one or two you can identify with this young man.

You know, we usually mangle this story in two ways. First, by acting as if it were not about money, and second, by acting as if it were *only* about money. It *is, of course*, about money. As far as Jesus is concerned, money is like nuclear power. It may be able to do a lot of good in the world, but only if it is in strongly built, carefully regulated containers. But most of us do not know how to handle it and it ends up handling us.

We get contaminated by its power, and then we end up contaminating others by wielding it carelessly ourselves. By wanting it too desperately, or using it manipulatively, or believing in it too fiercely.

Of course, every now and then someone manages to use it well, but Jesus says the odds of that are about as good as they are of driving a camel through the eye of a needle. This story is a story about money, for sure.

But it is not a story that is *only* about money, because if it were, then we could all buy our way into heaven by cashing in our chips right now, and that's just not how it works. None of us *earns* eternal life, no matter what we do. We can keep the commandments until we are blue in the face, we can sign our entire paychecks over to Crossroads Food Pantry without earning a place at God's banquet table.

No, the kingdom of God is not for sale. And look, the poor can't buy it with their poverty any more than a rich man can buy it with his gold. The kingdom of God, according to Jesus, is God's gift to be given to the people God chooses to give it to, and for whatever reason God wants.

The catch is, you have got to be free to accept the gift. You cannot be otherwise engaged. You cannot accept God's gift if your hands are handcuffed to something else. You can't make room for it if all your rooms are already full. Yes, and you can't follow Jesus to where Jesus wants you to go if you are already booked in a Ritz Carlton somewhere else.

This is why the rich man went away sorrowful. I am imagining he realized, all at once, that he was not free. He realized all at once how weighed down he was by all the things he'd worked his whole life to get.

Now, once again, you'd think his wealth would have made him free. Yes, he didn't have to dig ditches like so many common folk, but he *did* have to make a thousand decisions about where the water in those ditches would go, and whose land it would run through, and who would pay the requisite taxes, and have to fill out all the paperwork to get the permits necessary for it all, as well. How exhausting.

And look, this is interesting, he is the only person in the whole gospel of Mark who walks away from an invitation to follow Jesus. He is the only wounded person who declines to be healed.

Maybe you know a little of the feeling. Not because you are rich – no one in this room is as rich as this man, comparatively. The rich in Jesus's day were the 1/10 of one percent. They were fabulously wealthy. But maybe you feel trapped by something you once thought would make for an easier life than it's given you. Career paths do that to people, depending on what you choose to sacrifice on the way up whatever ladder you're climbing

It seems that poverty scared the rich man more than bondage to his complicated life. He could not believe that the opposite of rich might not be poor, but free.

"Then Jesus turned around and looked at his disciples. "How hard it will be for those who have great wealth to enter the kingdom of God," he says. And they were astonished at his words.

He was challenging the social order, turning it upside down. Those who rode through the gates of Jerusalem on golden chairs that looked like little thrones will find the ornaments on the tops of those chairs getting stuck in the arches of the many gates there. That's the baggage of riches.

Now, why the disciples were so amazed is hard to understand. Two of them who were fishermen had left everything behind to follow Jesus. Another one left a lucrative career behind as a tax collector.

I mean, all of them had walked away from something, but not because it was a prerequisite for being a disciple. It was more like a consequence, really. He called them, they had followed, so a lot was inevitably left behind.

But maybe they *wanted* to leave that stuff behind. I mean, he had made them see that nothing they had been connected to before mattered all that much anyway.

There was just something real about this man who had these burning eyes. More real than anyone they'd known before. And when they were separated from whatever it was that previously tied them down, they felt free.

They felt free like I felt when I went backpacking alone through Europe as a 23 year old. It's a feeling I can vaguely dredge up, but I have to admit, I've not felt it for a minute since. It made me feel very much alive, having so little to have to carry and everything I needed to be happy. The experience taught me that the first requirement to feel fully alive is, in fact, to be free.

It seems like a million years ago. And now what am I shouldering? What are we all shouldering? There are the kids. There's the load at work, the burden of our own ambitions, our worries about the world, about money; our worries about our aging parents.

To be alive is first to be free from those things that bind you too fast to the earth; that makes you and your life feel too heavy.

The apostle Paul addresses the matter of an abundance of money directly when he writes a set of instructions to his young disciple, Timothy. "As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God. They are to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, so that they may take hold of the life that is really life" (I Tim. 6:17-19).

"Take hold of the life that is really life – and not a counterfeit. That ancient warning has a very contemporary ring to it.

Howard Thurman once said, "Don't worry about what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and do that. Because what the world needs are people who have come alive."

Today we launch our stewardship campaign and I am using a poem of Gregory Orr's on being alive as the anchor for the whole thing. On the next three Sundays we're going to look at three different scripture texts: two from Mark, and one from Ruth that challenge us all to decipher the genuine from the phony, the real from the cheap knock-off.

Why? Because in this season, as in every season, the main life issue is about *how can we live fully and authentically and passionately*. God has loved us into this life but is not content with that. God knows this world is insidious. There is much that would rob our lives of meaning without us even realizing it. And those counterfeit things need to be exposed for what they are.

The church must continually be a place where people are freed from puny thinking, puny feeling, and the habit of adhering to purposes that just won't endure.

Here we look together for a window on what is genuine and lasting. That's always been my goal when I stand up before you.

So what is genuine? What really endures? What does it mean to be fully alive? I think those are the perennial questions, the ones most worth asking. Let's recommit to making that the aim of this place.

Amen

I owe a great debt to the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor for the approach I take to this text.