

The Most Precious Gifts

Matthew 19:13-23

November 19, 2023

Here we have two encounters that offer a piercing contrast.

Part one. Jesus has been teaching a growing crowd of devoted followers and intrigued listeners. Just one chapter ago, in response to a self-interested question from his disciples about who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, who will get a front row seat in God's kingdom, Jesus called a child forward. *You must change. You must become like children or you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.* To underscore the message, he gives them this memorable line: "Whoever welcomes one child in my name welcomes me."

At least, that line *should* have been memorable. But here we are, barely a chapter later, and those same disciples—the ones who have just heard him say those words—completely forget. And intent on protecting Jesus from unacceptable disruption and distraction, they order the parents to get those noisy, sticky, chaotic, unruly children out of his way. I don't know about you, but I can sense Jesus' frustration (what did I *just* say?) as he reiterates the earlier point. *Hey guys, the kingdom of God belongs to these kids!*

Part two. A man approaches Jesus with a question about eternal life. His query is practical. What must I do to earn it? Initially, Jesus points him toward the commandments found in their tradition, but the man senses the need for more; he knows that something is missing. Literally, *what do I still lack?*

Jesus takes him seriously. In fact, in an earlier version of this same story from the Gospel of Mark, the writer records, "Jesus looked at the man and loved him." Tenderly, he offers a simple invitation.

Sell your possessions. Give the money to the poor. Come and follow me.

It does not end well. This earnest young man is overcome with sadness. He catalogues the vastness of his resources, and then he walks away—not from his possessions, but from Jesus.

Perhaps similarly grieved that the man missed the moment, Jesus offers a sad summary statement. *It will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.*

The kingdom of God belongs to children. It will be difficult for anyone with vast resources to find it.

How are we to take this distinction Jesus draws for his disciples?

Start with this: it is a mistake to conclude that Jesus is condemning his conversation partner. His words are not directive; they are descriptive. Not harsh judgment, but distressing reality.

The man approaches Jesus seeking salvation, and Jesus takes his question to heart. He loves the man. Jesus does intend to save him. From what? From the ideology that dominated his life. From that unceasing whisper in his ear, "More, more, more. Always more. Never enough." We—you and I—we know that whisper. That man, like us, needed to be saved. So, Jesus invites the man into relationship. *Let it go. Come and follow me.* Jesus offers salvation, the freedom to experience joy, deeper faith, and generous living.

Part one. Part two. The distinction here is between those who run to Jesus to receive the blessing he offers and one who walks away grieving the prison of his wealth. I know the illustration lingered in the minds

of his disciples because still shocked by his words, they ask another question, another question of their own. "Then who can be saved?" they ask. Jesus again has a simple answer. *For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.*

Listen. If our faith is going to mean anything at all, it will make us uncomfortable. As a great preacher said, "The truth will set you free, but first it will make you mad." It will expose the lies by which we live and compel us to do something differently. Over and over again in the gospels, Jesus gently reframes the perspective of those who would follow him. Opening their eyes and their hearts, he urges them to see their lack that may lead to life.

What must we do to earn eternal life?
How can we live abundantly and find deep fulfillment?

Aren't these the questions we all want answered? All of us who sense there is something more. All of us who long for deeper purpose. The good news in this morning's scripture is that the answer isn't all that complex. Now, don't misunderstand me—I didn't say easy. The man who walks away from Jesus is our stand-in. He represents all of us too encumbered to accept the invitation to life that is *life*.

Here's the thing we need to know on Commitment Sunday. Jesus is talking about more than writing checks or filling out pledge cards. The kind of commitment Jesus demands begins with a radical change in our hearts that transforms our perspective. What Jesus has in mind here is not *charity*, not in the anemic way we use the word. His purpose is salvation. His vision is the kingdom of God—a dramatic shift away from a world in which some people survive only because the wealthy and powerful choose to act morally from time to time. This is no way to embody the kingdom of God. What Jesus preaches, what he lives, is a fundamental tension with the status quo. He destroys categories. He disrupts comfort. He invites us to a walk of discipleship. *Come. Follow me.* What Jesus demands is a new way of seeing everything.

A couple months ago, my friend Mike Mather led a wonderful seminar for our Lake Fellows. For many years, Mike served as pastor of Broadway United Methodist Church here in Indianapolis before moving in 2020 to become pastor of a Methodist Church in Boulder, Colorado. That morning with our residents, he told a story that has lived in my heart ever since. The church he now serves is in downtown Boulder, and several folks who are homeless often sleep on the steps outside their building. Early in his time as pastor, a group of members, seeking to initiate and get some help from the new pastor, came to Mike with a request that he do something about this issue. Namely, that he remove these folks from the steps of the church. You can imagine the words that were used. Eyesore. Unsanitary. Uncomfortable. Dangerous. Mike told the members that they would need to deliver this news, but he agreed to set up the meeting. So, one evening, in the church fellowship hall, Mike brewed a pot of coffee and gathered members of the congregation and those who were sleeping on the steps. He began by asking each person to gather in a circle and briefly introduce themselves, one by one, to the rest of the group. Each one shared their name and a little bit of their story. Then Mike turned to the members of his congregation. "Was there something you wanted to tell our neighbors?" Silence.

Abundant life begins when we see the world through the lens of the Gospel. When we see every person as God's beloved child, created in love and redeemed by grace. It is a powerful shift. And we can start right now. We can release our stranglehold on our possessions and our obsession with *more, more, more*. We can live generously for others. The invitation is open, and so much will depend on how we respond.

On November 19, 1838—185 years ago today—fifteen members of the First Presbyterian Church in the frontier city of Indianapolis gathered in an unfinished lecture hall of the Marion County Seminary. They were there to charter a new congregation in the New School Presbytery of Indiana. As one of our worshipers in early worship this morning said,

"Those must have been some tough old birds." A year later, after three invitations were declined, this fledgling congregation called its first pastor. A 26 year old, he was the son of a well-known preacher and seminary president, and the first full time pastor of this new congregation. And so, in the fall of 1839, Henry Ward Beecher arrived in Indianapolis, and this bold group of new school Presbyterians charted a new course in the new city. From its very start, the Second Presbyterian Church of Indianapolis sought to make an impact on the city in which God had placed it, to be a community of service and leadership. And over the decades, this congregation has done just that, establishing outreach centers and mission chapels, educating and caring for the poor in our city, working with others to form the first boy scout troops, schools, medical clinics, the city's first public library system. And here in this space, disciples of Jesus and servants of God have been inspired, charged, and sent to serve in every part of our city, our nation, and our world. New ministries have been birthed in these pews, in the hearts and minds of worshipers. New possibilities imagined. New ventures launched.

And now, 185 years later, it is in our hands. Prognostication about the Church's future is a hobby for many in our culture. Decline is the narrative of choice.

But what if we built?

What if we built a culture of civility, respect, and constructive dialogue, where every topic was fair game, and every voice could be heard?

What if we built?

What if we built networks of opportunity and dignity for neighbors with material need? What if we heard their voices and listened to their stories?

What if we built?

What if we built initiatives to invest in early childhood education and mentoring for students?

What if we built?

What if we built space for experiences of transcendence that lift the vision beyond our limits and toward the promise that with God all things are possible?

What if we built?

There are many gifts that come with advanced age. Or so I'm told. Second Church has demonstrated staying power. Think of what this institution, this congregation, this church has seen. Violence and global pandemics. The wonder and horror of human ingenuity and technology. Dramatic eras of social change and progress. Times of deep division and even civil war. It was on the 25th anniversary of Second Church that President Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address, the nation torn in two, and this congregation continuing to gather. Second has sought a faithful way forward in every age. Sometimes we have succeeded, and sometimes we have failed. Sometimes we've been mixed with faith and doubt, courage and fear. I feel the weight of that strength and tradition *and* the responsibility of the moment we are now in. I feel that call to build. More than anything else, the work of our church is a declaration of hope in what the world can become. It always has been.

That wealthy young man tragically missed out. He slinks away in self-doubt. He retreats in fear, listening, "more, more."

Second Church, we do not have to follow him. There is another guide. There is another path. It is the one that begins this morning's story. Children running to Jesus, eager to receive his blessing and to follow him.

What would it take for us to run toward Jesus in the year ahead? What must we release? What must be built?

Second Church, it's in our hands. Amen.