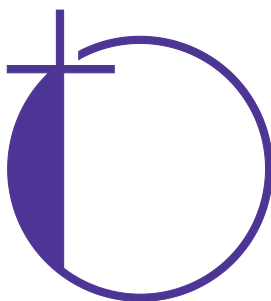
A large, expressive purple brushstroke sweeps across the top half of the page, creating a textured, artistic background. A white rectangular box is superimposed on this stroke, containing the main title text.

ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES!

STEWARDSHIP 2022

Jesus, the Rich Man, and Us
12 Days Toward More Abundant Living



MOUNT OLIVET LUTHERAN CHURCH

As he 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.’” He said to him, “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.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” 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 him, “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 for the sake of the good news, 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.”

MARK 10:17-31

Perhaps you’ve heard the joke about the two Christians arguing about taking the Bible literally:

“You can’t mean you take everything you read in the Bible literally?” says the one. “Of course I do,” replies the other. “Walking on water?” asks the first. “Of course, it’s right there in Matthew 14,” retorts the second. “And what about giants? You believe in giants?” “Sure, see Genesis 6.” “Miracles?” “Naturally.” “And angels, too?” “Absolutely. They’re all over the Bible.” “What about when Jesus says to give everything you have to the poor.” “Oh, no,” the second one responds, “Jesus was just using a metaphor!”

While not many of us might say it so crassly, a lot of us act this way. That of all the things Jesus said, he surely couldn’t mean this one. In fact, over the centuries, Christians have tried to soften the import of Jesus’ words in many and various ways.

But what if we took them seriously? Indeed, what if we took them seriously enough to believe that Jesus wasn’t just speaking metaphorically, or joking, or setting us up for failure to prove that we’re justified by grace alone. (And all of these interpretations have been offered from one time to another.)

If we take Jesus at his word -- something I’ve regularly found wise, though at times difficult, to do -- I think we’d discover that he is talking about more than our material possessions. Oh, don’t get me wrong, Jesus is very interested in what we do with the wealth entrusted to us, but he’s also interested in a whole lot more. He’s interested in how we understand God, ourselves, and each other.

When it comes to God, Jesus wants us to know how much God loves us and how much God blesses us. God, according to Jesus, is not primarily interested in correcting, let alone punishing us, but is all about giving -- giving us life, giving us what we need (what Jesus elsewhere calls “daily bread”), giving us each other, and more.

When it comes to understanding ourselves, Jesus wants us to see ourselves as stewards. Stewards, particularly in the ancient world, were very important figures. Though they were not the owners of the resource in question, rather they had been given authority by the owner to use those resources as they saw fit. Stewards, in this sense, wielded tremendous authority. But they were not owners. They had been entrusted with this authority. Similarly, we confess that God has given us all good things and entrusted us to use them wisely.

Finally, when it comes to our relationship to others, it’s vital to remember that one of the most consistent words of Scripture is that God always blesses us to be a blessing to others. We are put on this earth together, to take care of each other, and to love and support one another. This past year of pandemic has been a forceful reminder that we need each other.

And that, ultimately, is what this story is about. Remembering that God is the source of all blessing, that God has entrusted us with blessings and expects us to be wise and generous stewards, and that God created us to love and care for each other. When we forget these things, life becomes one challenge after another that threatens our sense of security and peace. And when we remember these things, joy, grace, and peace are ours in abundance.

As we journey through this year’s stewardship season together, we are invited to recommit ourselves to the important role of “Steward” that God has entrusted us. We are invited to experience anew the joy and peace that comes from trusting that God will provide all that we need, and we are therefore called to share generously with others. I’m excited to see what happens as we reclaim this role, recommit ourselves to God’s mission for us at Mount Olivet, and find ourselves renewed in faith, joy, and peace.

One final note on the devotions to follow. It may seem odd to focus twelve full devotions on a single story. I understand that. But, throughout my life, I have found myself coming back to this story again and again to understand it better. And my hope is that by focusing on it steadfastly for the better part of two weeks, the truths it shares about God, ourselves, and each other, will sink into us more deeply, take root, and grow. Blessings on your reading, reflection, and prayer, as God continues to bless you and all of us to be a blessing to others!

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Pastor Lose". The script is fluid and cursive, with the word "Pastor" written in a smaller, more compact style than "Lose".

David J. Lose, Senior Pastor



DAY 1

As he 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?”

MARK 10:17

Let's start with the question of this young man: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” That would seem to be the religious question, don't you think? I suspect that, indeed, most of those who are religious and most of those who aren't would agree on this one point. At the same time, they would assess the worth or validity of this question very differently.

For those who are devout, the question lends a certain clarity about the whole religious enterprise. Attaining eternal life or (for many) avoiding eternal damnation becomes the focal point of their being, the way they see their lives and view others. They relate to almost everything in their lives according to this criteria: does it lead to salvation or damnation? And they relate to almost everyone in their lives in the same way: have they been assured of their salvation?

Of course this is just what leads those who don't believe even further from the faith: there is a blatant and almost grotesque reductionism of the faith down to just one question. Life becomes oversimplified, a means to an end that all but negates the value, worth, and integrity of our present, earthly, and material lives in favor of a future, spiritual, and immaterial promise of heaven. Of what value are concerns about justice, equality, or care of the earth when the only thing that really matters is eternal life? Similarly, people are easily objectified in this religious framework. When your primary category is salvation, that is, you don't really have to care about the particularities of the person in front of you: their distinct history and experience; their particular concerns, hopes, and dreams; their unique perspective and value. Rather, all of that gets flattened into a single question: are you saved? Other persons, from this reductionist approach to religion, are not really individual subjects to be known and loved for who they are but instead are objects awaiting divine action either for or against them.

For this reason, one of the aspects of this story we'll want to pay attention to is how Jesus responds to this very question. At the start of the story, it seems clearly to be the presenting question. But will it still be so at the end? Good question...

Dear God, help us always to look upon the people in our lives not as means to an end but rather as gifts given from you to be valued and loved. In Jesus' name, Amen.



DAY 2

As he 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.

MARK 10:17-18

I’m struck by Jesus’ response to the man’s question. Actually, it’s not his question that Jesus seems to object to, but rather the way he addresses Jesus. Which is curious, because calling him “good teacher” is simply a polite form of address. So why does Jesus retort that only God is good, implying that the man should not address Jesus in this way? Does he think the man is merely flattering him?

I don’t think so. I think Jesus is setting up a standard by which to measure our attitudes, actions, and requests. Consider, the man is asking what he must “do” to inherit eternal life. How good must he be, in other words, to enter God’s kingdom? And Jesus’ very first words indicate that there is something amiss with the question itself. Once you imagine that eternal life is something you inherent or earn by being good, you’ve lost. No one is good – that is, really and truly good – apart from God. Which means both that no one is “good enough” to inherit eternal life and that entering the kingdom is finally not about “being good” in the first place.

Jesus’ second response is also important to note. He continues by citing the commandments (and adding or amending them to include not defrauding one another). Interestingly, nowhere in the Old Testament is it assumed or asserted that keeping the commandments will grant you either eternal life or relationship with God. God, that is, doesn’t give the commandments to help Israel become God’s people; rather, God makes Israel God’s people (Exodus 19) and then gives them the commandments as a gift (Exodus 20). Keeping the commandments, then, isn’t about our becoming good enough. In fact, they’re not about us at all. Rather, the commandments direct us to care for our neighbor. If they help us become better people, they help us become better to and for our neighbor.

All of this puts an interesting spin on the man’s original question. What must I do to inherit eternal life? he asks. To which Jesus responds in two ways: 1) There is nothing you can “do” to inherit eternal life – life with God, like every other kind of inheritance you can think of, isn’t earned but is given and received as a gift. 2) You’ve already received an inheritance – the law. So rather than worry about your relationship with God, look instead to the needs of your neighbor.

So, freed from concern about the hereafter, we’re invited to throw ourselves into the present moment, caring for those around us with the abandon and love of the God who gives law as a gift and grants eternal life as an inheritance.

Dear God, help us to get over our worries about whether we are good enough to merit your love and instead, inspired by your goodness, let us reach out to those around us in love. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



DAY 3

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.’” He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.”

MARK 10:18-20

There’s a perhaps natural tendency to assume that the rich man in this scene is something of a self-righteous punk. First, he engages in what looks like a vain attempt to flatter Jesus. Then he asks the kind of gargantuan religious question that only the super-pious ask: what must I do to inherit eternal life? Finally, after Jesus tells him that all he has to do is keep the commandments, he says that he has. Good grief, we think, rolling our eyes at such pride and insolence.

Except...

Except I think this way of reading the scene says more about us than it does this man. We’ve already reflected that Jesus was probably not rebuking this man as a flatterer but instead setting a standard of goodness that will redirect the conversation from what we can do to what God has done. Moreover, there is an expectation in Judaism that the law is, in fact, do-able. It is not given as a trick or as a trap but rather as a gift. Deuteronomy charges its readers to keep the law and to keep it perfectly, while Psalm 119, the longest Psalm in Scripture, is an extended meditation on the excellence of the law. This man is only to be commended for his diligence.

For this reason, I think that rather than interpret his assertion as a display of pride, perhaps we should hear it instead as a confession of dismay. That is, he’s not saying, “Good teacher, I am perfect, therefore reward me.” But rather, “Yes, good teacher, I have done all this, and still there’s something missing.”

Keep in mind that he comes to Jesus for a reason. He is, in every respect, a righteous man. He is, as we will soon discover, a very rich man. And yet his life is still somehow lacking. He is aware of a keen hole at the center of his being that has not been filled either by riches or righteousness. He is still searching, still seeking, still hoping against hope that this rabbi can meet his needs or at least point him in the right direction.

He is not pious or self-righteous. He is desperate, even heartsick, longing for something more.

And Jesus loves him for it.

Dear God, you will not reject any who come to you in need. Bless us now and always with the assurance of your love, and turn us in compassion to the needs of others. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



DAY 4

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.”

MARK 10:21

The key phrase in this passage, I think, is this: “Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, . . .” Without this phrase, we can read Jesus’ instructions to give everything away either as a test to see if this man was really faithful or as a requirement for entrance into the kingdom of God. When we hear that Jesus says what he says out of love, however, that changes everything. Now Jesus is not setting the bar, he’s responding to need.

“You lack one thing,” Jesus goes on to say. I don’t think this is “lack” in the sense of “you can’t get into the kingdom without it.” Rather, I think it’s more, “there is one thing keeping you from full and abundant life.” Part of what leads me in this direction is a detail from the very first sentence: “As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him.” Think of the other scenes in Mark’s story of Jesus where people have “knelt” or “bowed down” (same word in Greek): Jairus, begging for healing for his daughter (5:22), the woman who had been bleeding to explain why she touched him hoping for healing (5:33), and the Syrophenician woman asking that Jesus cast a demon out of her daughter (7:25). Do you see what I mean? All these stories are healing stories. In fact, I can’t think of a story in Mark where someone runs up and kneels or bows down who isn’t asking for healing.

What if this is a healing story as well? Perhaps the man isn’t just desperate, but sick – soul sick with all his possessions. But he doesn’t know it. And so Jesus tells him (not to test him or raise the bar or give him a how-to guide to getting in heaven, but because he loves him) that the one thing that is keeping him from enjoying the abundant life God promises here and now is all his possessions. And so Jesus tells him out of love to give them away.

But he can’t. The diagnosis is too great, the illness runs too deep. He has literally lost himself amid his possessions because he can’t imagine himself or his life without them.

Is there a part of our lives that we can’t imagine being without? If not wealth, is it career, or family, or loved ones, or accomplishments, or our memories? The typical move at this point would be to suggest that these things are also keeping us from Jesus. Maybe that’s true; I don’t know. Instead, let me say two things, maybe three. 1) Whatever Jesus asks of you, he will ask out of love. 2) The odd and difficult thing is that sooner or later we may very well lose many of the things we cherish to age or fortune or circumstances. 3) When that happens, Jesus will still be there to love us, just as he loves us now.

Dear God, You are love. Remind us of your love and help us to trust your love enough to let other things go. Remind us of your love and help us to love one another. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



DAY 5

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.”

MARK 10:21

So this man comes to Jesus because he's sick. His abundant life is choked out by his many possessions, such that even a righteous life doesn't satisfy but still leaves him feeling empty. And Jesus, out of love for this man, tells him to give away what he has.

Except he doesn't just tell him to give away what he has. He tells him to give it to the poor. Which means that, according to Jesus, our life is inextricably bound up with that of others. We have difficulty receiving abundant life without committing ourselves to the wellbeing of others.

Can we imagine that? That our wellbeing is intimately tied to the wellbeing of others?

This is not the imagination that animates our culture. We live in a world shaped by an imagination of scarcity where there is never enough and all of life therefore becomes a kind of never-ending competition. It is social Darwinism where only the fittest survive by accumulating and controlling scarce resources.

Yet when this man asks how he might inherit eternal life, Jesus points him 180 degrees away from a model of scarcity and invites him to delight in his wealth by giving it to those who are poor. This isn't, I think, simply divestment of riches or a call to a simpler life or even a warning about the love of money. This is a call to recognize that we – all of us – are in this together. That God cares for all of us. That we are, truly, brother and sister to one another and that our happiness and joy is therefore bound part and parcel with that of those around us.

Riches, countless recent studies have shown, tend to isolate us from those who are poor, insulate us from their conditions and need, and, over time, make us less sensitive to their pain and even their humanity. When we give what we have – freely, joyfully, sacrificially – to those in need we don't only help them, we help ourselves by entering into the fuller humanity that God created us to enjoy together.

So this man comes to Jesus because he's sick – his abundant life choked out by his many possessions – such that even a righteous life doesn't satisfy but still leaves him feeling empty. And Jesus, out of love for this man, tells him to give away what he has to the poor, for only as he joins himself in solidarity to those around him can he, indeed, inherit abundant and eternal life.

Imagine.

Dear God, renew in us the joy that comes from sharing all that we have with those around us, and keep us alive and sensitive to the need and bounty, the sorrow and joys, of our neighbor. In Jesus' name, Amen.



DAY 6

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.”

MARK 10:21

And still it's not over. What Jesus tells this man, I mean. He tells him to give what he has away, to give it to the poor, that he might have treasure in heaven. But then he says one more thing: follow me.

Two things strike me about this last detail. First, the heavenly riches stem from this act of solidarity with the poor – giving away wealth that has not, in fact, led to the spiritual enlightenment or abundant life he has sought. But giving it away, giving it to those who need it so much more than he does, will. Now, disentangled from his wealth, reconnected to those around him, now and only now is he free. Free to live with integrity, free to experience abundant life, free to stop worrying about the future, free to follow Jesus.

But what does that mean? I suppose we answer it by calling what Jesus invites him to “discipleship.” But it is of a certain kind, I think. And again we get a clue to what this means from the beginning of the story, and this is the second thing that stands out in this passage.

Mark starts this scene by saying “As he was setting out on a journey...” The word Mark uses for “journey” is often also translated as “the way.” Understood this way, it's a significant word in Mark's account. He begins his story by quoting the Isaiah passage about “preparing the way of the Lord” (1:2, 3). Moreover, each time Jesus talks about his death, he seems to be “on the way” with his disciples. In Mark 8:27, they are “on the way” to Caesarea Philippi, when he asks his disciples who people say he is, and he teaches them that the messiah Peter confesses must suffer and die. A little later, just after Jesus has been teaching them that he must die, the disciples miss his point altogether and argue about who is greatest while “on the way” to Capernaum (9:33), prompting Jesus to talk about servant leadership. Finally, as we'll see, they are “on the way” to Jerusalem when he makes his third and final prediction (10:32).

So now Jesus is again “on the way” when this rich man runs up. Where is he headed? To the cross. Where does Jesus invite this man to follow? To the cross. Perhaps not the literal cross that Jesus will hang upon, but instead the cross of self-denial; the cross of putting others first; the cross of trusting only in God and caring for neighbor rather than relying on your own abilities and assets and seeking your own good; the cross of seeking heavenly treasure rather than earthly treasure.

Why? Because Jesus loves him. And the only way to find life is to abandon yourself to God's mercy and goodness, discovering that only as you lose your life you find it, and that only as you give yourself away to others do you receive everything and more back again.

Dear God, we are nervous about the way Jesus went, the path he invites us to follow. Embolden us to take another step down that road, not knowing perhaps where it leads but trusting that you are the one guiding us. In Jesus' name, Amen.



DAY 7

When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

MARK 10:22

“When he heard this he was shocked.” Why?

We have to presume that he was shocked because he assumed that material riches signified God’s blessing. And it’s not just him. The disciples were also perplexed, confused, disoriented by Jesus’ words. So apparently it wasn’t just this man who was shocked but all of them. All of the people of his day, that is, assumed that material wealth was a sign of divine blessing.

Of course, when we say it that way – “the people of his day” – we make it sound peculiar, odd, a historical relic. But are we really all that different? Do we not assume, at least on some tacit, unconscious level, that people who have a lot of money or fame or power (which amounts to more or less the same thing) are, if not divinely blessed, at least special. More special, certainly, than the unemployed dad looking for a handout or the mom on welfare stretching her food stamps or the retiree whose pension took a dive and is now bagging groceries at the local supermarket?

Of course we do. Why else would we care what rich and famous people say? We assume that if they’ve been rewarded for one thing – whether it’s being able to read lines in a sitcom or being born into a wealthy family – they must have worthy opinions about other things. They’re different, special, blessed.

Part of the shock, I think, is not simply that Jesus asks this man to give away his riches and in this way seemingly denigrates the cultural status of the rich. Part of the shock is that he invites us to look at the poor as deserving – deserving of our regard, deserving of our abundance, deserving of our care and respect – and in this way elevates them and declares that the poor, rather than the rich, are blessed by God.

(Don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying that God blesses people by making them poor, nor am I advocating a romantic view of poverty as a state of blessings. I’m simply saying that God, like a loving parent, gives particular attention, love, and blessing to those children of God in greatest need.)

So I guess I think that the only reason we’re not as shocked as this man and Jesus’ disciples (and, as we’ll soon see, the rest of the crowd) at what Jesus says is that we don’t take him all that seriously.

But what if we did?

What if we believed that God loves us enough to strip us of all the artificial securities that we’ve built to protect our lives? What if we believed that God loves us enough to invite us to surrender all the things we look to for status and identity but that demand our soul in return for the ephemeral status they convey? What if we believed God loves us – and all people! – enough to draw our gaze away from the momentarily rich or fleetingly famous and look instead upon the most vulnerable and discover in them who we really are?

What then? Would we also be shocked and leave grieving?

Because here’s the thing: God does love us this much.

And, take note, God doesn’t make this a demand. Jesus tells this man simply that he lacks one more thing – he should go and give what he has and follow. It is an invitation. The man came asking what he could do to find the peace that has thus far eluded him, and Jesus tells him. It was his choice to come. It was his choice to follow. But he is



shocked – all his assumptions about wealth and blessing and even who and what he is have been shaken – and he goes away grieving.

We don't know, of course, whether this is the end of the story. Perhaps he has a change of heart. Perhaps he meets someone just a few miles down the road in such need that he can't help but give of what he has to care for him and discovers the truth of Jesus' invitation. Perhaps he returns at some later point to follow Jesus.

But whether any of those things happen or whether, as perhaps most of us assume, he goes away grieving only to try to console himself with his riches, we just don't know. And, to be honest, it's not that important.

What's important is how we react when Jesus invites us to do the same.

Dear God, your tremendous love for all people is shocking. It is not what we expect. It is not what we deserve. Help us recover from our shock that we might look upon ourselves and those around us through your eyes and follow you. In Jesus' name.

Amen.

DAY 8

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

MARK 10:23-25

Two questions: 1) Why does Jesus say it's hard for those who have wealth to enter God's kingdom? 2) Do we take it seriously?

The second question is easier than the first: over the course of history, we haven't taken Jesus at his word. Rather, we've typically "spiritualized" this passage so as to not take it seriously. One interpretive strategy that dates back at least to the middle ages suggests that there is a door into Jerusalem called "the eye of the needle" that was so small camels had to be first unpacked of all they were carrying before they could enter. Similarly, this interpretation runs, we must unburden ourselves of all that might be keeping us from entering the kingdom – greed, worry, envy, resentment, and so forth. Sounds reasonable, doesn't it? Trouble is, there is no gate like that into Jerusalem and Jesus was not speaking in metaphors.

A second strategy, particularly popular with Lutherans, is to say that Jesus was intentionally making a demand that no one could meet so as to make it clear to us that we cannot on our own keep the law and in this way drive us to God's grace. While Jesus' words may, indeed, have that effect, I don't think Jesus was inventing impossible commandments in order to teach us that we are justified by grace.

So like it or not, I think Jesus means it. I think wealth insulates us from our need. The wealthier we are, the more protected we feel from our vulnerability and the less dependent we are on God. There's a reason that Christianity flourishes in countries that experience poverty and it's not that the folks living there are less educated. Rather, it's that



their need, their vulnerability, their mortality and, consequently, their absolute dependence on God is so unavoidably transparent. Wealth isn't the only thing that can create an illusion of absolute independence and invulnerability, of course, but it is one of the chief ones. And those with little are therefore less likely to be fooled by the false security wealth promises.

One more thought: Can it be an accident that immediately before this scene Jesus scoops up little children and says that we should be like them if we want to enter the kingdom? In both that story and this one, it seems that the only requirement for entrance into the kingdom is knowledge of your absolute vulnerability and profound need.

So what if Jesus means it? What if it really is harder to enter the kingdom of God when you are wealthy? What if the only ones who enter God's kingdom are the ones who, quite frankly, want to, even need to, because they have nothing else with which to secure their hopes? What then?

Dear God, remind us daily of our need for you and for each other that we may seek you and care for one other in gratitude and hope. In Jesus' name, Amen.

DAY 9

"Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." 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."

MARK 10:24-27

So what if Jesus means it? What if it really is harder to enter the kingdom of God when you are wealthy? What if the only ones who enter God's kingdom are the ones who, quite frankly, want to, even need to, because they have nothing else with which to secure their hopes?

Then who can be saved?

This isn't just the disciples' question; it's also ours. If those who seem most blessed, most special, in our life together will have a hard time entering the kingdom of God, then it's understandable that the disciples would ask whether anyone can be saved.

But we ask the same question, even if for slightly different reasons. For us the question isn't simply about wealth, it's about anything we might seem required to do. If the rich man must give away his wealth to enter the kingdom, then what must we do? I mean, if there are things required of us, is it still a matter of grace?

Which is where Jesus' answer comes in: "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God. For God, all things are possible."

Here's our situation: none of us, by our own merit, can be good enough to enter the kingdom. Only God, as Jesus says right up front, is truly good. For us, it is impossible. Yet for God all things are possible. God can save any. God can, indeed, save all. For God all things are possible. This is the very core of the Reformation insight and teaching that we are justified – that is, found to be acceptable – by grace through faith. It is not about what we have done, might do,



can do – it is about what God has done and is doing through Jesus: namely, calling each of us beloved and acceptable out of love.

But doesn't that introduce a certain tension? Isn't there a way that this teaching erases what Jesus said earlier about it being difficult to enter the kingdom, about wealth getting in our way? I mean, if we say it's impossible for us but not for God, why do we even worry about questions of wealth? Doesn't stressing grace sort of make us take Jesus' earlier words less seriously, just like we wondered about earlier?

These are important questions that faithful Christians have wrestled with down through the ages. And, to be honest, I'm not sure I have the final answer. But here's what I think:

1) Yes, God accepts us not for what we've done but only and entirely because God loves us. In this sense, God is entirely like the loving father Jesus calls God, a parent who accepts and loves his children not because of what they've done or not done but simply because they are his children.

2) And, out of that same love, God desires that we not be led astray, trusting in wealth (or accomplishments or power or fame or whatever) rather than trusting in God. God sees how insecure we can be, God sees our penchant to put our trust in things rather than in God and so calls us away from these false promises. In the case of this man – and we can conclude, any and all who trust in their wealth – God calls us to give what we have to those in need to escape being possessed by our possessions and restore us to a deeper humanity by drawing us back into relationship with our neighbors.

3) All of this suggests, I think, that the kingdom of God isn't just something way off in the future. The kingdom of God starts now and is here, all around us. But it is a different kind of kingdom. It is a kingdom where those who are in need are honored precisely because of their need, and those who have much are invited to discover their purpose and meaning in using what they have for the good of others. It is a kingdom, as Jesus has said, where diseased children are admitted easily while the rich and powerful struggle to find a way in. It is a kingdom, finally, where grace and love rule, where vulnerability is cherished, and where a peace born of justice reigns. In comparison to the kingdoms of the world – built always on power and violence – you might even call this the anti-kingdom. And if Jesus is king, then he makes a very strange king indeed and reigns from the most grotesque of thrones.

Yes, there is a tension between Jesus' invitation for the man to give his wealth to the poor and follow him, on the one hand, and his promise that for God all things are possible, on the other. But it is the tension of the kingdom of God. A tension, I think, that we cannot finally resolve but only embrace, living in it and with it until this most peculiar of kingdoms comes once and for all.

Dear God, we do not understand your kingdom, because it is so far from anything we have experienced here. Bring it anyway, and bring it soon. In Jesus' name, Amen.



DAY 10

Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” MARK 10:28

Ah, Peter. It's hard not to love him. He is, above all other things, honest. When he perceives that Jesus is more than a miracle worker or prophet but God's anointed Messiah, he can't keep it secret but bursts forth in confession. And when Jesus teaches that God's Messiah must suffer and die, Peter is appalled and can't keep that secret either. And now, having listened not only to Jesus' exchange with the rich man but also his talk of wealth, poverty, and the kingdom, Peter again can't help but burst forth in another moment of unedited candor: “Look, we have left everything and followed you.”

But what does he mean? Does he wonder why Jesus is warning them about the dangers of wealth when they clearly don't have any? I mean, fishermen were about as high on the social ladder in the first century as they are in the twenty-first. Or is he trying to pull Jesus' attention back to their need. “Look, Jesus, enough of all this. Whatever that guy chose, we chose you?” Or maybe after hearing about the impossible possibility of salvation, Peter wants to claim a small part of the kingdom Jesus proclaims and says, “Keep in mind, Lord, that we've done just what you've asked – we've left it all behind in order to follow you.”

Truth be told, we can't know what Peter meant in this moment of candor. We can only note that he could not keep silent any longer but needed to reassert the devotion he and his compatriots feel for Jesus.

And Jesus interrupts him. At least that's how I read this particular sentence structure. After all, it says that Peter began to say. And, afterward, continues, “Jesus said....” Could it be that Peter had more to say but that Jesus cut him off? If so, why? I think it's because Jesus loves Peter as much as he loved the rich man.

Sometimes we read Peter's words in a way similar to the way we read the rich man's words about keeping all the commandments. But I don't think Peter is boasting. I think, like the rich man, he is pointing to what he has experienced, what he has done, even what he has accomplished and hoping it's enough.

But as we've already seen, it's never about “enough.” When it comes to the kingdom of God, there is no “enough.” Not enough deserving. Not enough earning. Not enough wanting. There is only God. And God's love, finally, is more than enough. And so before Peter can go any further into the realm of scarcity with talk about what he and others have done or not done, with concerns about enough, Jesus interrupts him.

Being interrupted isn't pleasant. It's not fun. It feels, actually, rather rude. But Jesus interrupts Peter anyway. Why? Because the path Peter is about to go down leads only to insecurity, and Jesus has come to replace insecurity with acceptance, to exchange concerns about wealth with eyes that see the need of neighbor, and to shift from concerns about enough to delight in God's unimaginable abundance.

Jesus interrupts Peter. Might he also be doing the same to us? What has happened in your life of late that might feel intrusive, disruptive, unwelcome, but might in fact be God interrupting us, keeping us from a path that leads only to death when God wants so desperately to give us life?

Dear God, so often we run ahead, heedless of your grace and mercy, clinging to what we have been told grants life. Pull us away from the pursuit of vain things, and help us to hear your disruptive call to life in the challenges and interruptions of our life. In Jesus' name, Amen.



DAY 11

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 for the sake of the good news, 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.”

MARK 10:29-30

So Peter makes another bold statement, this time reminding Jesus that he and his companions have sacrificed much to follow Jesus, just as he asked. And Jesus interrupts him, perhaps concerned that Peter is still living in the world of enough – demonstrating he’s done enough, or worried that he hasn’t, or wondering how much is enough, and all the rest. Jesus cuts this whole train of thought off before it gets too far out of the station.

Then Jesus himself responds. And here we get to sheer promise. Indeed, God will give abundantly – as in 100X abundantly – to all who follow Jesus.

But, is this a promise, or is it a warning?

Two things prompt this question. First, Jesus gets rather specific: no one who has left house, siblings, parents, work and so on.... Usually, when we think of what we should give up, it’s vices – you know, eating too much, spending too much money, talking ill of others, gambling, drinking, whatever. But here Jesus seems to ask us to give up what most of us would consider virtues: home, work, and family. Is this not typically what constitutes “the American dream”?

Second, after Jesus promises that those who have sacrificed such things will receive them back many times over, he adds that we will also receive persecutions – persecutions 100-times over. My immediate response to such a “promise,” quite frankly, is, “Thank you so much, Jesus. But no, I think I’ll pass.”

So what’s going on? Suddenly these words of Jesus seem far more like warning, or even threat, than promise.

Maybe, however, we’re back to the oddness of Jesus’ kingdom and our very objections to Jesus’ words reveal the distance between the kingdom of God and the one we presently live in. Remember again that the rich man also was asked to give up something close to his heart, something that on the surface was only good. Are we also invited to leave behind all the good things in our life that may lead us to believe that we ultimately don’t need God? When Paul talks about what he has left behind, what he has sacrificed for the gospel in his letter to the Philippians, he names all those things that made him righteous. He doesn’t do this because they are bad, or wrong. Rather, he names the very best things about himself because none of it measures up to the riches he has received in Christ (3:4-11).

Might we also be asked to recognize that nothing we can accumulate in this world – not riches, not honor, not family, not status – nothing compares with the absolutely unachievable, un-earnable, unmerited – and unconditional! – love of God. It’s not that any of the good things of our life are suddenly bad – just that none of them will finally save us, and if we think they will, we’ll miss out on God’s abundant love and life.

Which may, in turn, explain the question of “persecutions.” This message runs contrary to the cultural messages of achieving security through accumulation and power. What politician would be elected if he or she asked that you give up family, homes, and jobs? We are a country of “family first” and “jobs, jobs, jobs.” And of course these things matter. They are, in fact, good! But what’s even more important, Jesus says, is recognizing that all good things come to us from



God, and when we get confused about the source of our goods, security, and future, all is lost. Persecution, hardship, struggle — think, for a moment, of the last year we have endured -- tend to remind us that no matter how successful we are, we are still vulnerable, still need to depend on God, and can still count on God blessing us.

Dear God, help us to keep our eyes on you, never forgetting that you are the source of all good gifts. In Jesus' name, Amen.

DAY 12

"But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

MARK 10:31

Once again it's hard not to be struck by the oddness of Jesus' kingdom, as he states that "many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." This isn't the first time Jesus has made such statements. Earlier, Jesus said that those who want to save their life will lose it while those who lose their lives for the gospel will save it (8:35). Throughout Mark's gospel, in fact, Jesus announces that the kingdom of God upends most of our normal conventions and introduces a great reversal of cultural norms.

And maybe that's the point. God's kingdom — which we've at points called the "anti-kingdom" — is so totally different that we have a hard time fitting it into our usual categories.

So it's not that money is bad, but rather that, influenced by the culture and kingdom we live in, we're just prone to attach way too much importance to it. Again, I'm not trying to romanticize poverty. Christians should, I believe, be working to eliminate poverty and to help those in need at every turn and secure a measure of economic security for themselves and their family. Rather, we live in a culture that values the accumulation of wealth over just about anything.

The situation in Jesus' day was similar. Wealth was considered a sign of God's blessing, poverty of God's disfavor. But what if wealth is morally neutral, neither good nor bad on its own. What if what matters is what we do with wealth (or the lack of it) that really matters? Then perhaps the issue Jesus is addressing isn't primarily wealth per se, but rather our disposition toward it. Perhaps he is warning — not just the rich man or his disciples, but also us — that while wealth can be used for good or ill, it is nevertheless a powerful entity in our world and culture.

Wealth can provide us with everything we need...and it can insulate us from the needs of others.

Wealth can secure for us a safe home...and delude us into thinking that it is the source of our security.

Wealth can ensure that we never go hungry...but it cannot prevent us from being lonely or leading lives devoid of meaning or purpose.

Wealth is, well, just wealth, essentially morally neutral...a potential force for great good, but also perilous. The challenge is living in a culture — whether of the first or twenty-first century — that focuses on all wealth's potential without heeding its perils. Wealth, in short, can provide us with all our material needs — and this really matters! — but the danger is believing that it can also tend to our spiritual and eternal needs.

And so many, Jesus suggests, who are first in terms of the categories of the world — power, prestige, wealth — may



be surprised to discover that these things count for little in the kingdom of God.

God, as we've seen throughout these devotions, is a God of blessing. And one of the chief blessings God gives us is the confidence that God loves us, will provide for us, and has equipped us to care for each other. What God wants for God's children is, in short, abundant life: the confidence that nothing can separate us from God's love and the freedom that comes from such confidence to be wise and generous stewards, using that with which God has blessed us to be a blessing to others.

Dear God, remind us of all of our blessings that we may live in a spirit of freedom, rather than fear, and out of a sense of abundance, rather than scarcity, so that as we share your blessings we are blessed yet again with your gifts of joy and peace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Dear Mount Olivet Family,

In his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul states, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (8:28). This last year, I believe, has proved the wisdom of Paul's assertion. There was loss over the course of the past year, and hardship and grief and more. And yet we also sensed God at work holding us, guiding us, sustaining us, and renewing us.

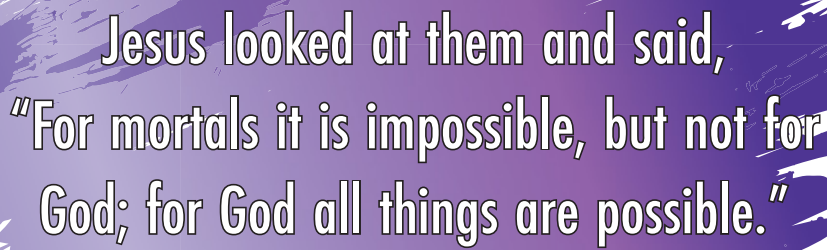
In fact, I will venture that, as challenging as the year past has been, when we look back on it, we will also view it as a year of renewal. A year when our recognition that we are vulnerable and rely on God for all things was renewed. A year when our belief that we need and can count on each other was renewed. A year when our confidence that our faith and our church are not just important but actually vital to our lives was renewed.

And when we sense renewal, we also and immediately are often overcome by a sense of gratitude. So let me close with a word of personal gratitude, both to you and for you. Thank you for your prayers across a challenging year. Thank you for your support when we had to make difficult decisions. Thank you for your generosity that not only allowed us to continue our mission and ministry but also to expand it, reaching out with hope to care for our neighbors in ways we'd never done before. Thank you. Even more, thank God for you.

Yes, I am grateful. And because of that sense of gratitude for you and renewed faith in God, I am excited to see where God will lead us next. It will be, of course, a journey, even an adventure, and there's no one I'd rather be on that journey with than you as I believe the possibilities God is offering us are endless!

Blessings to you in Christ, now and always!

Pastor Lose



Jesus looked at them and said,
"For mortals it is impossible, but not for
God; for God all things are possible."

MARK 10:27