

First Scripture Reading Job 23

Second Scripture Reading Mark 10:17-31

As we so typically find in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is about to head out on a journey, Jesus is about to go somewhere with a set purpose for ministry. Jesus is ever headed towards the cross, when He is interrupted, yet again. He is headed towards His goal, the salvation of mankind, when the fears and anxieties of this world are thrown before Him, with the hope that God will do something about it, that God will in some way acknowledge the despair we lay before Him. This man throws himself at the feet of his savior and asks how can I earn my salvation. This man comes running to kneel before Jesus asking “what must I do to inherit eternal life”. What measure of success must I have now in order to earn life eternal with God my Creator? This man has become so focused on his own role in justifying himself that he fails to see to see the ridiculousness of his actions. He has come running to Jesus, bowing before Jesus and calls Him good, a designation meant solely for God, who Jesus is. This man is submitting himself before Jesus, recognizing who Jesus is and then (Pause) asks what it is he must do in order to inherit eternal life. God, help me to help myself, only you can provide the answer that will let me complete my salvation, these are not the supplications of the humble.

With passages like this, I often like to wonder what it was the people who came to Jesus were looking of, what they were hoping He would say. As I read this passage I wonder what this man was expecting Jesus to say. I wonder whether he was hoping that Jesus would tell him, well done good and faithful servant, you are an example to this age. I wonder if this man was hoping that Jesus would assure him that his fruits would match his labors. If he was maybe hoping that Jesus would amend His statement and say only God, and you are good. But as much as we would like to label this rich man as being arrogant, this does not really seem like a man who is filled

with pride, he seems to be driven by an ideal of success that he can never achieve. He seems more like a man tormented by his goals, enslaved to his own expectations. Maybe he was hoping for a harsh judgment, for total condemnation. Maybe he was hoping that Jesus would look down at him, this man who is pleading at the feet of God and say, for you, only for you, there is no possibility of inheriting eternal life. Maybe, like today, the message of damnation for the masses, the message that God has in some way closed salvation off appealed to something inside of those who were spiritually shattered. Maybe, like today, the message of judgment prevailed, despite the work of our savior, because it sells to those filled with anxieties and self-hatred.

Maybe he was expecting the same judgment from God which so many of us grow to crave, which we come to expect, because we think we deserve it. We who have been judged as inadequate by our parents and by our children, judged as incompetent by our bosses and employees, judged as wanting by our spouses, and worst of all judged by the same person we see in the mirror each morning no matter how many diets, or self-improvement programs or how much positive thinking we do. So with all of the judgment we experience against ourselves we expect God to come and judge us likewise. We expect God to judge us to be as worthless as we judge ourselves to be. This is why so many flock to preachers who have a theology of ascent, who preach to us the good news of trying harder, they tell us to try harder to please God. They tell us we need to work harder to come closer to God because what we are now is pathetic and ugly to our Creator. We are told that we are far off but by our labors we can come close to God. We are told that if we just try hard enough, we can have not only earthly success, but inherit eternal life. They offer a savior who rescues us from our humanity, who lifts us above our human weakness instead of a God who comes down into the measured human life. This message is most certainly not good news, but for many it seems like the answers they need. For those who think

they need to be told that with enough hard work you can become something God is capable of loving. But being told we must rely on ourselves for salvation, is bad news for us all.

Maybe this is the same message that this man was hoping for. But, no matter how empty and meaningless the measurements of this life leave us, no matter how devoid of purpose all the judgments make us feel, we keep trying to fill our lives with them. We keep hoping something will help us to ascend out of this life which has been judged inadequate, but if there is hope for this life, if hope is going to come, it has to descend.

Whatever the man was hoping to hear as he ran to kneel at Jesus' feet, he probably did not expect such an orthodox and obvious answer. Jesus tells the man "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'". Jesus' response to the man is a focus on the second half of the Ten Commandments, which lay out God's intent for human community. They are pretty simple rules, very straightforward but still so hard to put into practice. I think what is fascinating is that Jesus does not tell the man something which would seem like some serious devotional exercise, Jesus does not tell the man to meditate day and night, to separate himself from the community to live a life of solitude. Jesus tells him to love this community that God has given, remember the Law so you do not destroy this beloved community. Love yourself as part of this community. God intends for those gathered around Him, centered on Him, to be upbuilt by all those within the gathered community, to encounter the grace of God again and again and be shaped into a community molded by God's grace. Not to constantly stand as a community of individuals continually judged without grace, without mercy. These Law is meant to rebuild the community again and again, broken by their own

flaws, but for this man they are standing as heavy yokes, and he wants more, he needs more, he needs assurance that he is redeemable.

Whatever doubts and fears this man brought, trembling at the feet of his Judge, whatever hopes he brought to the feet of his Savior, the answer Jesus gives does not remove the man from human life, into life eternal. Jesus descends into the life which continues to measure us and tell us we are not good enough. Into the community which is in constant judgment and continual given grace. Into the life where we never meet our own expectations let alone those set by God, where we become more and more lost looking for our salvation. Into the life where we are seeking something to lift us out of our depravity. Into the life which fails to see the love of God for His Creation. Into the life which from the moment we are born measures our adequacy, which places our children on bell curves, which measures success by our wealth and careers. This is the hopeless life where Jesus must enter, if we are to have any hope, because we are fully incapable of lifting ourselves out.

The man responds to Jesus telling Him that he has kept all of these commandments since his youth. He reveals that he has been working towards his salvation for years, since he was a child he has been so concerned with life eternal that it has shaped all of his actions. The man that Jesus encountered is a man broken, a man who has judged himself and found himself wanting, who has felt judged but never grace. A man who has done it all, but still feels empty. I imagine that this obsession and anxiety over life eternal from such a young age probably points to a tragic moment, a moment of fear, which has driven his life ever since. And that moment has led this man to this moment, to ask Jesus what he must do to be successful at earning salvation. What works can he do, what works can he rely upon to inherit eternal life? The problem with relying on our own works to justify ourselves is that when they fails, or worse succeed, we are stuck

with ourselves as a redeeming god. And we are destined to go through the wilderness of life believing that everything can be accomplished, with harder work, until it cannot and we are left bitter, beaten by something that is larger than our hard work can handle. This is what led this man to this point, kneeling at Jesus' feet desperately hoping that he can find the answer that will give him peace. He is coming to Jesus to escape the world, to escape the part of himself which is tainted with the burning question, how can I inherit eternal life.

So many of us are brought to Church to escape this world, for just an hour during the week. We come to escape the violence, the hatred which define the world around us and we hope for something more, for a better way of being human. Some churches have recognized this need and sought to fill it by telling their people to work harder, to avoid a world which they see as literally going to hell. They view passages like this, to point and say this is the kind of life Jesus wanted for you. These churches set up policies of conduct, they proclaim that Christianity is something that you can get good at, that it is something that with a little hard work, dedication and elbow grease, you can become perfect, a holy people. I hate to burst the bubble of anyone but Christianity is not something that you can get good at. You cannot pull yourself up out of this pit, salvation is not something you can achieve if you just work a little harder. Christianity is not something you can get good at because the only goal is to more fully receive the love of God which is poured out into our lives, and the only way we can do this is to admit how truly lost we have become, and then admit that as lost as we are, God loves the lost human creation that is before Him. It can never be about what we do.

Jesus says to the man "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". The man came looking for judgment, one place he was lacking and Jesus has told him. Jesus tells the man to sell what he

owns, to get rid of everything that is bogging him down, everything which has created this life of his. Use this dedication, use this drive to get rid of everything in your life which does not conform to the Gospel, and follow me. To take all that is broken in his life, everything that is keeping him from God, all of his self-reliance, and offer it up to God. Then the only thing that can be done is to follow the Christ who calls out to you, the Christ who loves you and leads you to the cross, where God is dying to love you.

We are told that the man was shocked and went away grieving, because he had many possessions. His previous successes are now an obstacle to him receiving the love that God is pouring out. He cannot follow Christ on His journey to the cross. His driven personality has led him to become wealthy but it has also made him into someone obsessed with his own salvation, it all has to go. He is grieving the loss of who he is, and he goes off, unable to follow Christ and witness to what must be done for his salvation. Jesus then turns to the disciples and says to them, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God”. His disciples were perplexed and asked one another “Then who can be saved”. Jesus responds to them by saying “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible”. Jesus’ teachings are not only hard, they are impossible. As those who are used to earning their way through life, coming back to grace again and again, is not just hard it is impossible. To continue to profess our own reliance on what is outside of us, from the day we first profess our faith until our funerals where ministers proclaim our reliance on the God whose hands we have been taken into. We must give up on what we have, we must give up on our baggage, and our dreams, and our reliance on ourselves. This is not a message meant only for the wealthy but for us all, for all of us who have parts of our lives must go so we can follow Christ, parts of our lives which fall away when they encounter the Gospel.

At this point, the disciples have reached a breaking point. They have left what little they had, they have left their nets, their livelihood, some have left John the Baptist the original judgment preacher, and they are finding it hard to hear that, even for them it is impossible for them to enter the Kingdom of God. Peter tells Jesus. "Look, we have left everything and followed you". What more can you ask of us? We know no one can justify themselves with their actions, but surely ours must be different, because we have left it all in order to follow You. We have done what the rich man could not. They must have been thinking amongst themselves, this cannot all be for nothing. We have given it all to you, our very lives are in your hands as we march ever closer to the cross, which you keeps bringing up, Jesus. But for them Jesus says it is impossible, no matter how many works you perform, you always stand as one judged by God, but the grace of God is revealed when He is not only the Judge but the one who loves those who are judged. Grace is the impossible possibility poured out on us, the hope descended into our lives which is filled with self-judgment and miracle cures. Grace comes into our lives and continually tells us no you cannot earn your salvation, there is nothing you can ever do, because God has completed the work of your salvation. You who saw yourself as ugly and far off from God will be first, God has descended into your lives, and given you His transforming grace, so let us follow Him.