

Teacher, Teacher!

A sermon given by Nan McMurry on May 29, 2022

Friendship Presbyterian Church

We're going to take up the story of the rich young man and his encounter with Jesus, but I'd like to start with my favorite subject, which is ... me! Many of you know that I work at the university, where I'm mostly based in the library, but I also teach part time in the history department. And everyone who has been a teacher or a student knows that the first day of class is typically devoted to housekeeping details: calling the roll, describing what the class will cover, listing assignments and requirements, etc. This helps to get everyone started on the same page and provides an opportunity for students to ask questions. One semester I had a student who asked more questions on the first day than all the other students combined, and all of his questions were some variation on "What do I have to do to get an A in this class?"—just the kind of questions every teacher loves. Not only did this student ask lots of questions, but he began each question the same way: "Teacher, teacher!" He didn't begin with my name or title or just raise his hand, but instead hollered "Teacher, teacher!" to get my attention. Put a bookmark in your mind for this student because we may see him again.

The story of the rich young man and Jesus is a very familiar one. It appears in three of the four gospels, Mark (which we read), Matthew, and Luke. Some of the details vary, but the basic storyline is the same in all three. It belongs to a category of Bible stories I like to call "holy smackdowns." In these stories someone, often a Pharisee, asks Jesus a question that is inappropriate in some way, intending to test or trick him, or get him to agree with whatever the questioner wants to believe. Jesus responds with words that are wise and often unexpected, and questioner is left unable to "score" off him.

In this case a rich young man asks Jesus what he must do to gain eternal life, and Jesus tells him to sell all he owns and give the proceeds to the poor; not something the man is expecting or prepared to do, so... smack! Jesus then lays it on even thicker for the disciples, remarking how difficult it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, and giving us the very memorable image of a camel trying to squeeze through the eye of a needle. It seems like a straightforward cautionary moral tale about the dangers that wealth can pose to our spiritual life. So, we could just quit now while we're ahead, congratulate ourselves for coming to church, and go home early to lunch!

Except... there's one line in the story that stands out because it doesn't fit with the rest of the holy smackdown narrative. It's not uncommon in historical accounts for there to be bits that don't quite make sense, and we usually deal with this by skipping over those parts because we like our stories to be coherent and meaningful. But a historian whose work I admire says that the parts that don't fit are exactly what we should pay attention to because they are like the X on a treasure map telling us where to dig. When we do, we may find that the puzzling details

turn out to be key to understanding the whole story in a new and deeper way. So, let's see if we can do this with the story of the rich young man.

The line that doesn't fit for me is this one: "Jesus looked at him (the young man) and loved him." The young man is the villain, or at least the fool, in the tale. Why would Jesus love such a man? Once again, we could take the easy way out and answer that Jesus loves him because Jesus is Jesus. Jesus loves everyone, even sinners. That's no doubt true, but it doesn't explain why Mark choose this particular character in this particular story at this particular moment in the story to tell us that Jesus loves him.

Asking why Jesus loves the young man raises additional questions. First, what do we know about the young man that might explain Jesus' reaction to him? We know next to nothing. Each of the three gospel writers uses just one word to introduce him. Luke is the most specific: he's a "ruler," but of what we're not told. In Mark's gospel, as we just heard, he is a "man." And Matthew describes him in the vaguest terms of all as simply "someone." None of them describes him as young, and we don't even know that he's rich until that is offered as an explanation for why Jesus' instruction to sell everything upsets him so much. The man simply comes out of nowhere, and he sounds suspiciously like my student: "Teacher, teacher, what do I have to do to get an A / inherit eternal life?" Not very lovable!

Second, if Jesus loves this man, why does he issue such a demanding challenge to him to sell everything and give the money to the poor? Why not offer the man some smaller first steps, such as selling one sheep a month and sharing the money? The young man could probably manage that, whereas telling him to sell everything has to be more discouraging than encouraging and sounds like a smackdown, wise though the advice may be. Why would you do that to someone you love?

Third, why is the young man made so unhappy by Jesus' directive? He's rich and probably accustomed to getting what he wants, so going away empty-handed as he does would be disappointing, frustrating, maybe annoying. But we're told that he goes away shocked and grieved, a much stronger reaction than mere disappointment.

We now have lots of questions, and our tidy smackdown story is starting to unravel. Is there a better way to understand it?

Jesus gives us some clues in his initial response to the young man. When addressed as "Teacher, good teacher," Jesus rejects that label and asks, "Why do you call me good?" This is surprising to us because we certainly think of Jesus as good. Maybe Jesus realizes that he's being approached as a sort of spiritual vending machine: insert coin, remove recipe for eternal life. By reminding the young man that they both serve a higher good, maybe Jesus is trying to steer the conversation away from transactions and towards relationships, as a preparation for "follow me." And when Jesus lists examples of the commandments the man should be honoring, he doesn't mention the early commandments about belief but rather those that focus on the treatment of others.

Maybe Jesus sees something in this young man that we can't see. Maybe underneath his pushy "Teacher, good teacher!" he's a person who has worked hard to achieve everything his society has held up as the marks of success, but he still feels something is missing. Maybe what he calls "eternal life" is his unfulfilled desire for his existence to hold more meaning. Maybe it's that spark of earnest yearning that touches Jesus' heart.

And maybe the young man is devastated by Jesus' command to sell everything, not just because he doesn't want to part with his possessions, but because the command reveals to him that everything he has been striving for-- the money, power, and privilege—does not represent a life well lived. Maybe he's like a star quarterback who devises great plays, throws perfect passes, and dodges all his tacklers, only to find that he has been driving towards the wrong goalpost for the whole game. Maybe he realizes that the wealth he thought fuels his success is instead a hindrance. Maybe he sees himself clearly in the mirror for the first time, and it is not a flattering reflection.

If this is true, it explains why Jesus tells the young man that he must sell everything. A manageable assignment of just a sheep or two would be something the man could handle while continuing in the same wrong direction and avoiding the self-confrontation that the thought of making a clean sweep provokes. Jesus may seem to be issuing a smackdown, but he is really throwing the young man a lifeline, or inserting a stone into the man's shoe that will chafe, bruise, and remind him of Jesus' answer to his question with every step that he takes.

Though we may hope for the young man's future, we don't know the end of his story. He exits the stage, and we hear no more about him. But Jesus isn't done with this lesson yet, not by a long shot.

When Jesus tells the disciples that it's harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, they are amazed. Why such surprise? Because despite spending so much time with Jesus, they still seem to see the world just as the rich young man does. In their day riches, privilege, power, good health, and a long life were all seen as signs of God's favor. Someone like the rich young man represented the cream of society's crop, and if even he would have difficulty entering the kingdom, the disciples ask uneasily how anyone can. The answer Jesus gives them lies at the heart of our faith, but they don't seem to hear. Instead they rush deeper into their anxieties, and Peter reminds Jesus that they have already left everything to follow him; that is, they have already done what Jesus asked the young man to do. They want reassurance that they are now home free. And Jesus does reassure them that anyone who follows him will gain far more than is lost, but they still don't seem to get it.

Later in the same chapter follows what may be the silliest request anyone makes of Jesus, and it comes from two of his own disciples who want him to promise to let them sit closest to him when his kingdom comes. It reminds me of a t-shirt one of our former pastors had with "JESUS LOVES YOU" printed in big letters, and then in very small print below: "but he loves me more!"

At this stage the disciples still expect Jesus to behave like an earthly king when he goes to Jerusalem, to overthrow the Romans, take control from the Jewish leaders, and reward his favorites by placing them in the vacated seats of power. In other words, the disciples expect Jesus to act like a rich young ruler!

Except for Jesus, everyone in this story, from the supposedly clueless rich young man to the supposedly enlightened disciples, is missing the point. They all say, “What must I do?” or “Remember what we have done!” As long as we see eternal life or the kingdom of God as something we can earn, as the reward for our success, or as long as we see God’s love as a limited commodity doled out according to our merits and subject to forfeit when we inevitably stumble, we are all camels staring down the vanishingly small eye of the needle.

Jesus himself is very clear about this. When the disciples worriedly ask “How can anyone be saved?” Jesus tells them bluntly that it is impossible for mortals to save themselves. The focal point of the entire story rests in his next words, “But with God all things are possible.” With God we are already on the other side of the needle.

We often speak of life as a journey, but when we think of journeys we focus on destinations, arrivals, finish lines. We think of races with winners and losers. We strive to overtake whoever is ahead of us and lengthen our distance beyond whoever is behind us. We plot our strategies for dealing with the needle. But what if the point of the journey is the journey itself because of the companions, not the competitors, who share the way with us? I had a college roommate whom I’ll confess I didn’t care for because we were more competitors than companions, but she had a poster on her wall with a quotation (by Albert Camus, of all people) that I’ve always remembered: “Don’t walk before me; I may not follow; Don’t walk behind me; I may not lead; Just walk beside me and be my friend.” Or, as our own pastor Tom says, “Grateful, very grateful, to be on the journey with you.”