

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today's gospel reading is uncomfortable. Jesus brings up a topic that most church-going folk do not want to talk about: money and possessions. And that is why so many pastors, theologians, and biblical scholars have spent time trying to explain away or manage the complexity of this text by softening or ignoring parts. Rev. Dr. Sarah Hinlicky Wilson summarizes some of the management techniques used to soften the passage,¹:

1. Some say that the rich man didn't actually keep the entire law, so Jesus telling him to give up his possessions was just a way of calling the man's bluff.
2. Others argue that no one can keep the law, and no one can give up everything either; Jesus used a rhetorical device to call **our** bluff.
3. Some argue that giving up everything was a command to this specific rich man, but only to him and it doesn't apply to us.
4. Others say that it was a real command, but it applies *only* to the rich. Since all of us can think of someone richer, then we don't qualify.
5. Then, some say that *everyone* is rich (presumably because even the poor can think of someone poorer). So, Jesus gave us an out near the end reminding us that we can't give everything up, but God can.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-28-2/commentary-on-mark-1017-31-11>

Passages like this have challenged the best of scholars to stretch their hermeneutical skills to find a way to manage today's text. Yet, I'm not sure we *need* to manage it. I'm not sure the purpose is to explain it away or find the hidden loophole. Rather, I think this story is meant to highlight the contradictions that are the foundation of humanity.

Dr. David Berliner, a professor of behavioral science, reminds us that, "We humans are structurally made of contradictions, living peacefully, sometimes painfully, with our oxymoronic selves... Think about buying technological gadgets while opposing child labor and ecological waste, or about condemning theft, then illegally downloading music and movies... There are environmentalists who constantly fly [and] finance traders who care about poverty. Sebastián Marroquín remembers his father singing lullabies while he drifted off to sleep— and his father is the drug lord Pablo Escobar, the greatest killer in Colombian history. Living a contradictory life is profoundly, perhaps definitively, human."

Dr. Berliner goes on to say that, "Humans live peacefully with contradictions precisely because of their capacity to compartmentalize. And when contradictory statements, actions, or emotions jump out of their contextual box, we are very good, perhaps too good, at finding justifications to soothe cognitive dissonance."²

And that is why today's passage is probably less about resolving the dissonance and more about sitting with it. After all, we are reminded in the

² <https://www.sapiens.org/culture/human-contradictions/>

passage about the impossibility of earning salvation. We humans are complicated, complex, and contradictory. And I think we are a lot like that rich man running up to Jesus. We speak in terms of absolutes, we believe that we've done everything right, and when we are encouraged to give up our possessions to share our gifts with others, there we get stumped. We so want to participate in God's liberation. We want to be kind and compassionate. We want to see eternal life here and now. Yet, we are caught up in the contradiction.

And that is where, in today's reading, Jesus turned looked at the man and loved him. This was not a throw away statement. In Mark's gospel this is the only person we're directly told was loved by Jesus. You see, Jesus saw the complexity of that rich man – a person who wanted eternal life and who also struggled with his many possessions. And, Jesus loved him.

Now, what happened with this rich young man? Did he hold on to his possessions? Did he give them away? Was he at the cross at Jesus' death? Did he see the empty tomb or become an unsung evangelist? Mark doesn't tell us what happens, but I'm not sure that matters. For this story is less about us and more about our God.

We have a God who understands our human struggle. The struggle from the beginning of the Scriptures that tells a tale of an apple, snake, and humankind torn between two contradictory futures. The struggle of Israelites torn between a God who rescued them from oppression and the pull toward creating a God of their own. The struggle of man torn between eternal life and sharing his possessions with the poor. And if our God can look at these

and the many struggles of humankind and still love us, then that is one incredible God worth following.

Friends, I don't need to belabor the point for this is a powerful story on its own. For we have a God who looks at us with all our messed-up contradictions and loves us. And we are invited to embody a little bit of God's love for those in our lives who are filled with the human contradictions that say one thing and do another. We are invited to share what we have with the poor as a means of experiencing eternal life. We do this not out of obligation but rather out of pure awe that we have a God who loves us unconditionally, contradictions and all. Amen.