

The Gospel passage this morning is a hard one for us to hear. Like the man who came to Jesus, we have many possessions. Jesus tells him to sell what you own, give the money to the poor and then come and follow Jesus on the way. It is hard to hear, “sell what you own and give the money to the poor.” We can so easily come up with all kinds of interpretations for what Jesus is saying here. He doesn’t really mean sell everything does he? Francis of Assisi, who’s Feast day was last Monday, took Jesus literally and gave away all that he had. But then we look at the first followers of Jesus. Martha and Mary supported Jesus in his ministry with their hospitality in their home. We know that other women also supported Jesus and his male disciples in their ministry. When Jesus sent his disciples out to teach and to heal he told them to accept the hospitality that was offered. Jesus moved his ‘home’ from Nazareth to Capernaum. So perhaps for some selling what they own and relying on others hospitality in their ministry is the way that Jesus would have them be, but for most of us that isn’t what Jesus may be saying.

The man asks Jesus, “what must *I do* to inherit eternal life?” Jesus in the gospel passage this morning makes it abundantly clear that there is nothing that *we* can do to inherit eternal life; it is all by God’s grace. We can’t earn our way into eternal life, we can only follow Jesus and live into his teachings, to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. So Jesus tells his disciples that what is impossible for humans, God can achieve. Our relationship with God must be primary in our lives. The portion of the ten commandments that Jesus quotes to the man are the ones that address person-to-person relationships, not the ones that refer to this man’s relationship with God. Jesus asks him only about the commandments that he has kept. The man has let his focus on what he owns impede his relationship with God. The man had let his possessions get in the way of his relationship with God. He has become attached to his many possessions, his status in society that his wealth gives him. The Word of God that he heard and saw in Jesus had been sown among the thorns in his life. As Jesus told his disciples earlier in his ministry, the seed that was thrown among the thorns are those *who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing.* (Mark 4: 18-19) And the man went away grieving, for he had many possessions. The question Jesus is asking us is how do our possessions prevent us from living into who God is calling us to fully be in this life. If Jesus asked you to sell your home, leave your friends and follow him, could you do it? That is the type of radical discipleship that Jesus is asking of us this morning. Following Jesus means being in a relationship with God that may look like foolishness to the world. St Francis was ridiculed by people in his town for turning his back on his family’s wealth. Some of us have been asked to sell our homes, leave our careers and our friends of many years (and even our kids, we left one at Ohio State) and follow Jesus into a new way of life. And as Jesus said we received new houses, brothers and sisters in Christ, as well as those who would guide us on the way. And obstacles on the path as well, it is not a smooth level path!

Jesus is asking the man to unburden himself of those possessions that hold him captive in his life. Those material things that may give him status and privileges in society, but are holding him back from growing into the person God created him to be. Jesus has been telling his disciples over and over again that they are to receive the kingdom of God like

a child. They are to be dependent on God alone, not to seek security in material wealth or social status. As Jesus told his disciples, *How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!* (Mark 10: 23) Wealth gives us the illusion that we are in control and don't need to be dependent on God. Jesus tells us that wealth chokes our relationship with God. Wealth is not necessarily the problem; our attitude and desires are what lead us away from our relationship with God. Our prosperity makes it harder to hear how Christ is speaking to us in our daily lives. If something we own is blocking our relationship with God we need to sell it!

*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 10:25) This passage makes no sense in our current world. The Greek word for camel and rope differ by one letter in Greek, so it is possible that Jesus said it is easier for a *rope* to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. There is also a gate in Jerusalem that the people of Jesus' time would have known about, that was commonly called the 'eye of the needle.' It was a small gate that was always open to allow people to go into or out of the city when the main gates were closed. It was very narrow and low to make it difficult for anyone to go through, probably so that the guards could keep an eye on who was coming into the city for security reasons. A camel could enter by this gate, but only if all the burdens that it was carrying were taken off and set aside. Then the camel had to get down on its knees to pass through the gate. In my Bible I found a page from a *Forward Day by Day* reflection on this image of the camel going through the gate and the man with many possessions. The author wrote:

Stripped of all its worldly goods and humbly on its knees, the camel can negotiate the eye of the needle. So it is with the rich man. Jesus asks him to divest himself of all his goods and give the money to the poor and then follow him. Not impossible, merely shocking. What do you need to take off your back to enter the city of God?

That is the question for this morning. What is it that you own that is weighing you down and holding you back from living into who God created you to be? That is the question that Jesus presented to the rich man and presents to each of us. Each of us has been given gifts and talents to use to proclaim the gospel in our lives. Those innate talents may have little or nothing to do with what we own. Take the time this week ask God how you are to more fully proclaim the kingdom of God in your life. The answer may, like the man in this morning's gospel, shock you!