

What Should We Do?
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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“What Should We Do?” Pilgrim Church UCC, October 11, 2015, (Mark 10:17-31) Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jesus is setting out on a journey and a young man comes to him with a question he doesn't hear all that often. “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus lists out the commandments that deal with human beings relating to each other: don't murder or commit adultery or steal or bear false witness or defraud anyone, and honor your parents. “Teacher I have kept all these since my youth.” And Mark writes, “Jesus, looking at him, loved him.”[1]

Many times Jesus had to go up against those who opposed his teachings. Jesus went up against those who tested him and tried to make him look foolish. This earnest young man is seeking and searching and has his heart on a question of ultimate concern: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus loves him for it. But then issues a challenge: “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 young man is shocked by Jesus' answer to his question and goes away grieving, for he had many possessions. The rich young man is the only person in the entire New Testament who doesn't answer Jesus' direct call to follow him. This man is the only person who essentially says no when Jesus says, “Come, follow me.” He goes away grieving because he has so much stuff holding him back from Jesus.

It's a story about wealth and privilege and questions of ultimate concern and seeking meaning in our lives. It's a story that serves as a cautionary tale. Jesus loves this young rich man. That is explicitly stated in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus offered him transformation, which he just wasn't ready for yet.

Money can be used for good or ill. There are so many examples of people using their resources to help others and make a difference. Money can also insulate us and isolate us and put blinders on us from what's happening out there. Gated communities and skyboxes in stadiums and first class seating—some of these perks that come with privilege prevent people from just being together. Jesus was all about breaking down those barriers that separated people from one another and from God. After all, don't we learn from people who are different from us?

Jesus is challenging this man—are you or will you use your money to help those in need or are you keeping it all for yourself? Maybe that's the question Jesus is posing to all of us. Are we using our money to help those in need or are we keeping it all for ourselves? It's like the scenario I once heard during a seminar on church stewardship: if someone were to look at our checkbooks or online bank accounts, would they be able to tell that we're Christians? How we spend our resources matters and says a great deal about who we are and what we prioritize in our lives.

You know, unless we live under rocks we probably noticed that Pope Francis was just here in the United States! He's begun his papacy with a focus on the poor and those on the margins. Pope Francis has even critiqued capitalism as an economic system saying that if we have an economy of exclusion and inequality, that economy is responsible for harming people. How is it not news when an elderly person dies from exposure? How is it okay that food is often thrown away while there are people who are starving? Is survival of the fittest really what we want to promote as a society? Pope Francis has been asking these compelling questions.[2]

During his U.S. visit he said, “We can find no social or moral justification, no justification whatsoever, for lack of housing.” Pope Francis spent time with people who are currently homeless in our country and he didn’t stop there. He spoke about another group that often is on the margins of our society—immigrants. In the speech to Congress Pope Francis said, “Thousands of persons are led to travel north in search of a better life for themselves and for their loved ones, in search of greater opportunities. Is that not what we want for our own children? We must not be taken aback by their numbers, but rather view them as persons, seeing their faces and listening to their stories, trying to respond as best we can to their situation.” So he called upon American lawmakers (Republicans, Democrats, and Independents) in particular to think about immigrants as human beings just like you and me. People who are coming for a better life for themselves and their children—and who among us can’t relate to that on some level?

Pope Francis also referenced the Golden Rule during his U.S. visit—to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Versions of the Golden Rule are present in every major World Religion anyway! He reminded people that we have a responsibility to protect and defend human life. Though instead of using the Golden Rule to speak specifically about abortion in this instance, Pope Francis called for abolishing the death penalty as a way to protect and defend human life. He said, “Every life is sacred, every human person is endowed with an inalienable dignity, and society can only benefit from the rehabilitation of those convicted of crimes.”[3] In the end, Pope Francis has critiqued capitalism, advocated for justice and mercy for the poor and immigrants, and advocated for the abolition of the death penalty (among other moral stances.) Pope Francis notably addressed climate change when he was here and linked caring for God’s good earth to securing the well-being of future generations. So much for not mixing religion and politics!

Now some of us may have been thrilled to see a Pope come to the U.S. and speak to Congress about some of these moral issues. Others of us may not agree with his stance on just about anything. But one of the things I appreciate about Pope Francis and his visit to our country is that it got all of us talking about these issues on a deeper level. Because these aren’t just political questions, these are moral questions. Perhaps these are even questions of ultimate concern—who am I, why am I here, what does God need me to do? These questions and the answers we seek give us profound meaning in our lives.

When Jesus and the rich young man have this conversation in Mark’s Gospel, it ends abruptly. The rich young man is shocked by what Jesus says to him—sell all my hard-earned possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow you? He goes away, grieving. It feels like he doesn’t like what Jesus has to say so he just takes his ball and goes home. What if he had stayed and continued to engage with Jesus? What if he had said, “Jesus, I don’t think that I can do what you’re asking. But I want to follow you because your teachings, and you are touching my life. Can you help me understand what it is about my possessions that are preventing me from connecting with other people and holding me back from this relationship with you?”

The great Quaker teacher Parker Palmer once said, “When the going gets rough, turn to wonder.” When we encounter something that’s uncomfortable or brings up some strong feeling inside of us, it’s helpful to ask: why am I reacting this way? What’s this reaction teaching me about how I work? Why does this person see the world so differently from me? Instead of getting judgmental or defensive or taking my ball and going home, we can turn to wonder and deeply listen to the experiences of others. Perhaps that’s why Pope Francis’ visit is important even for Protestants like us—the dialogues we have in our country about these political, ethical, moral issues just got more meaningful for everyone by having a religious voice at the center of the conversation.

The hopeful note in Mark's Gospel and in the witness of Pope Francis is that we're not in this alone. God is with us. After the young rich man goes away grieving and the disciples ask Jesus, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus reminds them, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."^[4] We get ourselves into trouble when we think that we can go it alone. If there are problems, we can single handedly fix everything. There's this underlying message today in Mark's Gospel that we can't forget about God. We can't forget that God is at work within us and among us.

Can anyone inherit eternal life? This isn't like a beloved family member's set of silver or curio cabinet that gets passed down generations. Maybe our job is to receive the grace that is freely given because there isn't a way to inherit it no matter how much we try. When we live into this freedom that we can't build up our own accomplishments and somehow earn rewards from God, then we feel a sense of gratitude. It's not about us, it's about God. God knows that we separate ourselves from God from one another and from our best selves. God forgives us. God loves us back into wholeness. And when we feel a sense of gratitude for God being with us and loving us no matter what, we can't help but see people as God sees us—with eyes full of compassion. "Jesus, looking at him, loved him." Can't we do that too?

Receiving grace and seeing others with Jesus' eyes can fundamentally change us. And Jesus reminds us that none of this can happen without God. With God, all things are possible. Faith is often much more about trust than belief anyway. Trusting that God is with us and loves us for exactly who we are. Trusting that God is at work in our world even if we can't always understand how. Trusting that God needs us and that we can help God mend the world. Let us thank God today that no matter what happens, we are never in this life alone. Amen.

[1] Mark 10: 17, 20-21.

[2] James Downie, "Pope Francis' Stinging Critique of Capitalism," The Washington Post, November 26, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2013/11/26/pope-fra...>

[3] All Pope Francis quotes found in Peter Baker and Jim Yardley, "Pope Francis, in Congress, Pleads for Unity on World's Woes" The New York Times, September 24, 2015 http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/25/us/pope-francis-congress-speech.html?_r=0

[4] Mark 10:26-27.