

The Thing Lacked Mark 10: 17-31

The passage we have from Mark's gospel this morning is found in each of the synoptic gospels with some variations. The basic story is the same and although the descriptive adjectives of the man are different. In Mark he is just a man, not a young one nor a ruler. But he is not anywhere in any of the gospel accounts given a name. Thus he could be anyone. In every case he is described as being wealthy and that wealth is often made the focus of discussions on the passage. This approach is probably greatly influenced by the position of the passage within the lectionary and church calendar. No matter which year of the lectionary cycle we are in, this story appears during what is termed by the church as the stewardship season—that time that it is deemed appropriate to discuss the financial aspects of discipleship. I have often heard this passage used to create a sense of guilt around personal wealth and the issue of stewardship in order to increase giving or pledging support to the institution of the church. Some of Jesus' words to the man who has approached him definitely bring up the issue of wealth. But that doesn't seem to be the only issue here. I think we need to look at all portions of the passage before we decide it has only one thing to tell us. So let's think about the context and the opening of the passage. Just before this we are told that Jesus has blessed children and given instructions on how they were to be welcomed by his followers. This text begins "as he is setting out on a journey. This journey is not just any trip or even just the usual traveling ministry he has been doing in the countryside. This journey is the one that he has set his face to just a few chapters ago. At this point in Mark, that phrase is telling us that we are to remember Jesus' destination on this journey. He is on the way to Jerusalem and the cross. Jesus has begun to tell those around him just who he is, what that identity truly means and what will happen to him. It is in this context that a man comes running up to him and falls to his knees before him with this question: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" This form of address and his kneeling which a literal translation of the Greek would be to fall on one's knees indicates the man is showing Jesus respect. This question is unlike those posed earlier by the Pharisees who were "testing" Jesus. This man has a sincere question—he wants to know the answer. In truth, I suspect that many of us if we had been present would have been straining to hear Jesus' answer to this particular question: "What should I do to inherit eternal life?" As we would expect, Jesus does not immediately give an answer to the question but responds to a question with a question. We often overlook this interaction in our consideration of the passage. Perhaps we see it as an unimportant detail. Yet Mark rarely, if ever includes something he does not consider important. Jesus' question to the man is: "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." A friend in the lectionary group I meet with each Wednesday made the comment that to him Jesus sounded grumpy at this point. This man has come seeking answers to a question about the inheritance of eternal life. He is kneeling before Jesus which is a sign of submission if not worship. So could Jesus be trying to get the man to acknowledge his divinity? We are not given the reason the man approaches Jesus as the one with the answer, but it is probably related to Jesus' reputation in the country side. Jesus then continues his response by telling the man what anyone who recognizes God knows—"you know the commandments." Jesus then lists some of the commandments already

given to the Israelites. But have you ever noticed that in this passage the ones Jesus lists are all those which are about human relationships; the ones about how we are to treat each other. The man responds: "Teacher, I have kept all these things since my youth." The man has approached Jesus with this question for a reason. He has known what God commanded, yet has not felt secure in his inheritance. He has come to Jesus seeking something else to do in order to obtain what he wishes: eternal life. After Jesus has told him only God is good, instead of recognizing Jesus' divinity, the man response while still respectful indicates that he sees Jesus as just a man, a teacher to respect, but nothing more. Yet he still wants to know what he can do to ensure he inheritance he seeks. That is his focus. So Jesus responds by giving him something to do. We are now getting close to the part of the passage that is often our focus. But there is one other detail Mark includes which seems to me very important. Before Jesus gives the man something to do, we are told: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him." Even though the man has not recognized Jesus' true identity, Jesus looks at him and loves him. Jesus, loving the man, tells him "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." "You lack one thing." The statement is not you have too many things. The man is told "you lack one thing." From Mark we are told that he has many possessions, so what is the one thing which Jesus perceives the man lacks. For some reason, we tend to focus on what the man is called to give up, not on what he lacks. After all, in our present culture, not many would recognize that man was lacking anything. In a material sense, Mark is telling us that the man had it all. Yet he was seeking another inheritance: eternal life. The man's response to Jesus' instruction to sell everything was shock and grief "for he had many possessions." I taught a Lenten Study quite a few years ago called "Models of Discipleship". It took a passage from each of the gospels and focused on what defined discipleship in that gospel. One of the models used this story. It generated the most discussion among the group. All responded with their reactions to the first part of the answer—wanting to find ways to understand it that would allow them to be faithful disciples without having to give away all their possessions. After all, if they sold everything and gave the proceeds away, then they would be the poor. Much ink has been used to try to find ways around this understanding of Jesus' words. The comment Jesus makes to the disciples after the man leaves seems to justify this concern. "Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those with wealth to enter the kingdom of God!'" The disciples are perplexed by these words, probably because it was a traditional belief that prosperity was associated with God's blessing and favor. We often make the same association. The image which comes next is firmly rooted in our consciousness: "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." We often use this metaphor to comment on those we consider wealthy. This metaphor led to some early exegetes proposing that there was a narrow gate in the wall of Jerusalem through which a heavily laden camel could not pass without the burden of the "wealth" he carried being lifted. Archeology has shown such a gate did not exist. So much thought and effort to explain away our reaction to the association of giving up possessions to that one important thing we lack. Jesus said the man lacked one thing, not that he had too many. Remember, Jesus did not stop his instruction to the man with the selling of possessions in order to give to the poor. Jesus included an invitation to the man to come back and follow him. The attachment the man had to his possessions led to exposing the one thing he lacked—the ability to whole heartedly come

and to follow Jesus. Throughout the gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry, many people come and kneel before Jesus with a request—but everywhere else the request is for healing for himself or for someone else. This man's request in many ways is a request for healing, even though he himself may not recognize that need. When the man tells Jesus he has obeyed the commandments from his youth, the commandments not mentioned are the first ones—the ones which tell us to worship God first, to only worship God, to not create idols—those commandments about our relationship to the divine being who covenanted with us. Jesus looks at this man with love and asks that he be obedient to those instructions. The man instead grieves because he places possessions above discipleship. When the disciples respond to Jesus' metaphor about the camel and the eye of the needle it is with astonishment and a question of their own: "Then who can be saved?" Perhaps they truly understood what was interfering with the man's acceptance of Jesus' invitation. Perhaps not, as Peter seems to pat himself on the back by pointing out to Jesus that he and the others had left everything to follow him. What matters most in this passage is that Jesus looked on the man who could or would not come and follow with love. Jesus here also told the disciples something else important for us to remember about who can be saved and how it occurs. "For mortals, it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." We are very often like the man who came to Jesus seeking what we can do in order to inherit our place in the kingdom. We also have things which mean so much to us that we have trouble with our following Jesus' teachings. These things which we value so much may not be wealth or possessions, but attitudes toward others, prejudices and judgments that we make. These things are often hard to give up, but when we seek to follow Jesus we are accepting the teachings which he gave to his disciples. We also remember that Jesus looks at us and loves us. We recall that with God all things are possible, even our transformation. Thanks be to God.