

Mark 10 Attachments

I have been thinking about the attachments that I have to things recently. It isn't exactly a pressing matter at this moment, but I have a home that is much bigger than I need now. The time is coming when I will no longer be able to take care of the house or live alone. When I was a member of a family of four living there, the house often seemed too small. Now it is much too large. I also was an only child and the only niece of one of my mom's sisters so I received many things when they passed. I have a love for old things, and I have inherited a bunch of them. So this much too large house is pretty full of stuff, a great deal of it is very old stuff with memories attached about who previously owned it. I am emotionally attached to this place that my husband and I built, where our children grew up...and which is not only full of things but precious memories. Many attachments to possessions, not so much a great deal of wealth, but attachments to possessions all the same. The gospel passage this morning is again a very familiar story found in some form in each of the synoptic gospels. The theme of this passage seems clear if rather harsh as relates to possessions. In each case the texts begins with the fact that Jesus is on a journey, not just traveling around the country side but on his way to a destination. Jesus has "set his face to Jerusalem" and is trying to teach those following him what that means. At this point on the way, Jesus is approached by someone with a question. At the beginning, this person is only identified as a man in Mark's account. Throughout the entire interactions, he never is named—just a man seeking an answer. In each narrative this approaching individual either calls Jesus good or refers to his goodness and asks what must be done to have eternal life. The well established pattern of Jesus to a posed question is to reply with a question. In this case Jesus responds: "Why do you call me good?" There is no answer recorded to Jesus' question. We are not told why the man asks the question of Jesus. We do not know if this person has been present during any portion of Jesus' ministry thus far or has just joined the procession. But he turns to Jesus seeking the answer to what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus' continues his response by saying, "You know the commandments" and lists six of the ten given to the people at Sinai. Each account agrees that Jesus responds that keeping the commandments is necessary. The one seeking the answer to obtaining eternal life replies that they have kept the commandments "since their youth." Jesus tells the man that he lacks one thing in his pursuit of this goal of eternal life. Mark tells us, "Jesus, looking at him, loves him and said, '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.'" Hearing this, Mark tells us the man was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Jesus then turns to his disciples telling them, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" He also says, "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." What seems to have always jumped out at those who encounter this word is this requirement to give up "stuff". Almost from the beginning interpreters have concentrated on the "giving up" portion of what is said. And that has led to various efforts to soften the passage's demands. One ancient manuscript was modified to read "how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God." (This insertion is found in the King James translation.) A ninth century interpreter created the idea of a entry gate into Jerusalem which was narrow so that heavily laden camels had to have their cargo removed before they could enter. All of these variations indicate how reluctant we are to "give

up” our possessions. Some just say that Jesus wasn’t serious about this man having to sell all of his possessions, yet do we really want to think that not all of what Jesus teaches is serious. This is the only point in Mark’s gospel where Jesus makes this demand. There are many places where Jesus calls for radical renunciations but the specifics vary across the Gospel depending upon the situation. In all cases there is a common thread—Jesus’ call to a life of discipleship. And that is what Jesus has offered this man with the selling of his possessions—a chance to come and follow him. So how do we view this text without minimizing what Jesus tells the man? After all, if Jesus wasn’t serious about the man needed to get rid of all his possessions, he could have told him he could keep some. But that wasn’t what happened. Jesus watched the man walk away grieving. I think the key for us to this passage lies in what Jesus said before he told him to sell everything. Jesus said, “You lack one thing.” We don’t often think of someone with many possessions lacking things, but that is what Jesus told the man. Our culture places a high value on the accumulation of things. Advertisements continually tell us we need this or that in order to be happy; in order for our lives to be better. There is a strong association in our minds about the benefits of wealth which accounts for the lure of the lottery and the appeal of shows based on being a millionaire. But this man obviously had the ancient equivalent of this with his many possessions. Even so, he feels insecure about this future, he senses there is something missing in his life in order for him to obtain his goal of eternal life. Before Jesus tells him to sell his possessions, he voices the man’s uncertainty telling him he lacks something. But instead of giving him something to add—he tells the man to get rid of his possessions. Jesus prefaces this instruction to the man by saying, “You know the commandments” and listed six of the ten given through Moses to the people of Israel. But the six Jesus perceives the man knows are the six which describe relationships among people—“You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud; honor your father and mother.” These are ones which follow the first four. What are the four commandments which Jesus did not list as being known by this man? “You shall have no other gods before me; you shall not make for yourself an idol; you shall not take the Lord’s name in vain; and you shall honor the Sabbath Day and keep it holy.” I would venture to say that what Jesus sees lacking in this man’s life is a relationship with God. When Jesus tells the man to sell his possessions it is coupled with the invitation to come and follow him—to be in relationship with God—to put that relationship first. That is the message we have from this text. We need to stop focusing on what we might be required to give up. Instead we need to focus on what we might lack in our relationship with the Lord. Do we put God and God’s instructions first in the things we say and do? Do we care for others and put their welfare about self interest? When we commit to following Jesus the things found in those six commandments the man knew and kept will be present in our lives. They require us to treat one another in ways that don’t injure others. But following the first four requires that we live our whole life looking at others in the same manner that Jesus did—valuing them and respecting them no matter how different they appear to us—even when seeing them as Jesus sees us all means that we have to give up some things like participating in systems which treat people differently. Because we are firmly attached, not only to our things, but to the ways of acting and living that define some people as “other” and thus less deserving, we too often lack one thing. These ways of thinking are firmly entrenched in our minds and frequently make it hard for us to follow Jesus’ teachings when dealing with others. These things are not wealth or possessions, but attitudes toward

others, prejudices often instilled during childhood, and judgments we make. These things are usually hard to give up or change. But when we seek to follow Jesus we are accepting the teachings which he gave to his disciples. When the disciples reacted to Jesus' comments about the man who went away because he could not give up his possessions, they asked, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus response was: "For mortals it is impossible, but not God; for God all things are possible." This is true in our lives as well. Jesus looks at us and loves us. And we know that with God all things are possible, even our transformation into disciples who can look at others through the eyes of our Lord and see other beloved children of God. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.