

October 14 – Pentecost +21

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Job+23:1-17>

Hebrews 4:12-16

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Hebrews+4:12-16>

Mark 10:17-31

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+10:17-31>

The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. Sometimes people treat Scripture either as a stagnant ancient text, or as the be all and all of any discussion and decision they make. Rarely do we consider the word of God to be living and active. The challenge for preachers, teachers, and readers is to interpret the word of God faithfully, in a way that honours its context and, if applicable, relates it to our current situation. And when one is able to do both, Scripture is indeed quite something, cutting through all the facades and stuff, to reach where it matters, a place where few, if any, others can reach.

Our texts this morning vary from each other in type of literature, their context, their audience, their time, so bear with me as we explore them. When we turn to our gospel reading we see Jesus on a journey carrying on from healing, teaching, blessing children, when suddenly He's interrupted by a man, who runs up to Jesus, kneels and asks a question, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Before we get to Jesus' response let's briefly consider what this question means or where it comes from. When I think of inheritance I think of something that is passed on usually after someone dies. An inheritance is usually specifically designated for someone, and not just a group at large. So it makes me wonder why this man is asking the question this way. Maybe Jesus' teachings about Gentiles, like the Syrophenician woman, has this man wondering whether salvation is only for Jewish people, or possible for all people – even poor people, and even people like children who have no status or worth. Well if this man has been so faithful in keeping the commandments, and sees non-Jewish men being included in this Kingdom of Heaven perhaps he's beginning to wonder what he has to do get eternal life?

Jesus, looks at him, loves him and says, "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." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, because he had many possessions. This is one of the few instances where it specifically says that Jesus loved someone instead of had compassion for them or something else, and goes on to tell him to follow Him. But it seems that the man is unable to do it.

Jesus goes on to say that it will be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. Everyone who hears this is shocked and they start to ask each other questions. But Jesus specifically points out the rich, He doesn't say it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone to enter the kingdom of God, but someone *who is rich*. I don't think Jesus is picking on rich people, simply because of their financial affluence but because of how different they are from people like children – who are powerless, without influence, and depend on others for safety and security.

The rich, in contrast, are powerful, wield influence, and depend only on themselves for safety and security, or at least the best safety and security that money can buy, whether armed guards or alarm systems.

I don't believe there's anything wrong with having money, and we should say 'rich' is a subjective term. Many of us probably wouldn't consider ourselves rich, or if we have a dollar figure associated with being rich whether it's a million bucks or a six-figure salary, most of us probably aren't in that category; but if we asked 2/3rds of the world's population if we were rich they'd say yes. In any case, it's not the dollar figure I think Jesus is talking about, but rather what riches represent, and how much of an obstacle it can present to faith and putting trust somewhere outside of yourself and your wealth.

Let's keep this in mind and consider the book of Job, what comes to mind? Unfortunately we don't have much time to really get into the book, but we know from today's reading that Job is in a dark place. If we were to look at the beginning of the book, we would read that it says Job is from a place called Uz, which isn't really a Jewish region, in fact some identify Uz with the kingdom of Edom, and some others with Arabia. Job is a rich man, who's faithful to God, but the Adversary, also referred to as Satan, or the Accuser, claims that the only reason that Job is faithful is because he's so rich and fortunate. If Job was to encounter suffering and calamity the Accuser claims that Job would not respond to God the same way. I'm not going to talk about the academic, historical part of Job, although it's worth researching and maybe a good Bible study topic, but this book that has found its way in to the Bible has spoken to many people, in many centuries, in many ways.

Some have looked at Job with a theological and philosophical perspective, as to how a good God can allow suffering. Some, especially following the Holocaust, have viewed Job as a champion of patience in the midst of suffering. Perhaps today Job speaks to you differently than in the past. Maybe Job's words and your words. Searching for God who is not found, and all you want to do is hide in the darkness.

There are many helpful parts in Job, when Job cries out and shouts at God, and in a sense gives us permission to shout at God too...because God is big enough to take it. God also responds to Job's questions, which may or may not be helpful but still we can look at them. At the end of the book, Job's wellbeing is restored, he has more children, double his wealth, and lives for many years. The temptation is to say that if you trust through the hard times everything will work out fine. In a sense that's true, yes one day the world as we know it will be much, much different and we will not experience suffering or grief...but that's not life on earth as we experience it now.

Our lives on earth are messy – sometimes we're happy and everything seems fine or at least okay, and then there's an interruption. Maybe an unexpected diagnosis, a flood, or a move across the country. But these interruptions force us take account of what's really important. When Jesus is interrupted on the way by the rich man who asks how to inherit eternal life. When Job is living his life and all of a sudden the people and things closest to him are taken away. These interruptions, while perhaps painful and downright inconvenient, also allow us to take a step back and ask what's really important? Who is really important?

As Maren and I purge through our house, the daunting inconvenient interruption of moving has forced me to ask what's really important. Do I really need this thing, or that thing; does it make sense to buy something when we're not going to be here much longer. While I've been super comfortable to just be and build a nest so to speak, getting furniture and pictures for walls, it has been liberating to get rid of unnecessary things, sell some, or donate them to people in need. The last thing I want to do is draw attention to myself. You know most of the time I focus simply on the texts and that's it, and when I use personal illustrations it's just to say that when I'm speaking to you I'm also speaking to myself and am not asking you to do anything that I wouldn't do myself. But it has been freeing to get rid of stuff, of clutter. It reminds me of the discussion series we had to Lang House last winter. It sounds counterintuitive but I have enjoyed, at least at this point in time, selling or giving things away and giving money to some people who might need it more than I do. But how much harder would it be for someone whose worth and self-worth is wrapped up in what they own? That's what's really at stake.

Listen to how our gospel reading ends, and see if you can pick out which part of the second half is different from the first.

“Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

Did you get it? Father...Father is not mentioned in the second half, and I believe it's because once we find our heavenly Father, once we are identified as God's children, our sense of value and worth is determined by God not by our money. Once we, like Jesus, see others and love them for who they are, we too feel called and encouraged to give to those in need.

Maybe similarly to the rich man many people today ask, how do I live forever? How do I stay rich in heaven? Maybe such questions demonstrate anxiety about one's soul. The only way to truly find peace to this anxiety is to give it completely to God, our soul, our understanding of who we are, and how to use the resources entrusted to us.

You can see the other picture on the screen of a book entitled, “Kingdom Wealth: God's plan to prosper you and why people remain poor”. I know you're not supposed to judge a book by its cover, well I'm judging it by its title. God promised to prosper certain individuals in the Bible but never did God promise wealth for accepting God into our lives. Jesus never said follow me and I will make you rich, or your life easy, but we are promised God's presence and we are committed to being a presence as a faith community for each other and for our neighbourhoods. There might be times where we, or people we meet, feel like Job alone and in despair. There might be times we meet people anxious about death and what happens to their soul. But when we consider that the word of God is living and active may we remember that Scripture is not meant to be a collection of do's and don'ts but a guidebook of God's love for us so that we can love God and love each other. The beauty in this is that it is so simple to remember, and while it's hard to live out sometimes, it also creates opportunities to ask what and who is truly important – not stuff, but God and God's people. Amen.