

Sermon October 10 2021 JaQuan Beachem

SCRIPTURE: Mark 10:17-31

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: “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.”’ He said to him, ‘Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.’ Jesus, looking at him, loved 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.’ When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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.’ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, ‘Then who can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’ Peter began to say to him, ‘Look, we have left everything and followed you.’ Jesus said, ‘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.’

SERMON: “For Good” Minister JaQuan Beachem

Good morning, community! I am JaQuan Beachem, and I am delighted to be worshiping with you on this morning.

I’m sure that many of you are familiar with this passage, and maybe get caught up in the camel and the eye of the needle, and the first being last and the last being first. I’m hoping to offer us, while holding those tensions, another approach. And I invite us to lean together into the love that Jesus offers in this text. Before we do, let us pray. Holy One, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight. In the name of the One who came to save, we pray. Amen.

So, it being October, a kind of spooky season, what better time to talk about witches than now? “Because I knew you, I have been changed for good.” Is anyone here familiar with the musical “Wicked”? For those of you who may not be familiar with it, it’s kind of seen as the prequel to “The Wizard of Oz.” You have Elphaba and Glinda, the witches of this world. Elphaba is the nice girl outsider with green skin, stigmatized for her defiance with corrupt government systems. And you’ve got Glinda who is deemed the good witch, who is a perhaps spoiled rich girl. And it is about their relationship building through love, envy, friendship, some deception, and at the end trying to reckon with what it means to be unwilling to accept difference.

It can be easy for us to try to name what is good and what is not, instead of focusing on how we can *do* good or *act* good in our world. In the musical “Wicked,” I want to point us to a particular verse in the song “For Good.” I just read a portion of it in your hearing. You’ll notice, music nerds like myself, that in this song “For Good,” Elphaba takes the lower line of the harmony, and Glinda the higher line, until the final refrain where Elphaba takes a leap of faith, changes keys and sings on a higher frequency, and Glinda takes the lower register. I offer to you that this changing of keys was a shifting of mindsets. It was a seeing of one another, someone whom they knew very well, and who had been prescribed a certain identity marker, in a new light.

And I would say that in our passage in Mark this morning, that Jesus is inviting us to let go of some identity markers and to see another side of our humanity for good. As we dive into this gospel message today, let us discern together how Jesus might be encouraging us to live for good, to live at a higher frequency. To examine what we might need to let go of in order to see ourselves and neighbor for good. And so, no surprise, I’d like to offer a message to you entitled “For Good.”

Here we are in Mark’s gospel, and we are told that a rich man seeks out Jesus with a burning question. In other gospels, this man is referred to as a “ruler” in Matthew, and a “young man” in Luke. We see that there are alternative identifiers for this gentleman. This man comes with the question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Now last week I heard that you all talked some theology with Sarah Drummond. You discussed eschatology, the Kingdom of God. Shall we dive in a bit more together? The theology here in Mark of our rich man is a binary of sorts, where he is operating on a mindset where entering into the kingdom has to be earned, that there is a scorekeeping that occurs, and that he would have to somehow with his pockets or with his behavior offer a way to “cash in” to the throne of grace.

I also offer to you other inheritance stories, such as Esau and Jacob. But here in this gospel, the rich man shows his chops by his knowledge of the Commandments that we find in Deuteronomy. And that is a great start. But I believe that Jesus is also acknowledging him to open up, to see something bigger, and to expand his mindset, to shift his gaze as Elphaba and Glinda did.

After hearing the rich man share the Commandments, Jesus does not wag a finger. Jesus actually raises him one more. Jesus invites him to give each and every one of his possessions, or so it seems. Some will read this passage as a need to relinquish one’s real estate, to relinquish the clothes off of one’s back, and to sell all of their assets. I’m not sure that it’s just that simple. I’m not sure that we can only check off boxes in order to find our way to salvation.

But as we investigate this, I offer a couple of things. Jesus takes the rich man’s request seriously. Moreover, Jesus responds with love. Jesus, the one whom God sent to save, does not look down on the gentleman with judgment. I think this is a major key to reflect on as to what we might do as believers, as children of God, as we make our way to the throne of grace. As children of God, we must operate in a spirit of love.

The second thing that I offer to you is this question: Can one earn an inheritance? And if so or if not, what does this mean for our salvation? Jesus sees the rich man in a new way. He sees him in

his most authentic and vulnerable self, and in his humanity. Not in the prescribed identity markers that his society or our society, our broken world, has placed on him. But in love, Jesus offers peace that inspires change, a peace that inspires giving, and a peace that inspires action.

Now, this can be a lot to hold. Until now we even see, with the rich man, that all he knew was that what he was worth was what he owned. He was bound or weighed down by his misplaced identity, whether placed on himself by self or by his society. He has been groomed in a capitalist society where the value of his worth was placed on his pockets. And until meeting with Jesus, coming to God, he was solely identified by his riches. He has been guided by winning, and not by generosity of heart.

In this moment, he becomes a bit unraveled. But there is hope in this unraveling. Jesus offers a hope that invites him to a higher frequency. As children of God, we also have access to this higher frequency. This invitation does not come with a contingency plan. This invitation is offering to see ourselves as beloved, and to take an inventory of our possessions and of our spirit, and offer them appropriately as God leads us. This invitation to the rich man shatters his world view. To move in the name of love is countercultural to our society in this broken world. Though, in this passage we are reminded to take up a cross of love.

Some who encounter this text might be quick to think wickedly of rich man, solely with pointed fingers, looking at his response of shock and grief with disdain. But can we imagine a world in which this grief came from a place of earnestness, that this grief of change as his world view was shifted upside down by Jesus, by the Savior? That it just took some time to be coped with and processed?

As I stand before you today, I am processing the last 18 months, and am still kind of in awe, and grieving some of the things that I had hoped to have done and was not able to. And I am also grieving the ways in which we are connected together but at a distance. And so, I would say that in this moment of this text, maybe our task is not to judge, but to bring these grievances to God, to bring our fullest selves to the Savior. The task at hand is to check in with ourselves and with God and with neighbor, and discern the way together. It is a both/and, because in giving we also receive.

As we take up this cross of love, we have to let go of the metrics of stigma and shame. We have to let go of our proximities to power and privilege as well, if we hope to see one another as God sees us. Holding this truth, that the rich man is worthy of love, is a heavy one to process. Isn't it wild that we can have such a hard time seeing ourselves as beloved? Isn't it wild that oftentimes we find ourselves hiding behind one identity or façade? Behind a title or an accolade?

In this realization, I think that we might want to shift our question from "What must I do to inherit the Kingdom?" to "What must I do to invoke the Kingdom here and now for good?" Jesus is calling us and the disciples, like the rich man, to change our mindset, to shift keys, to operate on a higher frequency, the frequency of love.

Let us note that poverty does not translate to piety either, as we are being called to leave behind finger pointing and judgment. As we move closer to God and operate on a higher frequency that

no amount of money nor level of stature or status can buy, may we flip models and mindsets of scarcity so that we might operate on the frequency of love, which is our greatest commandment uttered by the Savior.

Jesus invites us to move in the truth of our being, the truth not of society or of man, but of God. Jesus encourages the rich man, and us, to avoid placing our faith and our value in material things, but in Kingdom things, to reach towards God. Jesus is offering us an opportunity to open up, and to ask what we might do to invoke the Kingdom here and now, as we take up our daily bread. To receive the greatest gift of all – love – is not an easy thing to do. It is a lifelong practice. And for the human capability, it might seem impossible. But even in that, I offer you the hope of our passage that all things can be possible with God. *All things can be possible with God.*

So as we choose not to hide behind wealth and status, and we choose to not point fingers at others, and as we choose to move at a frequency of love, to make a key change, to move radically in a world that has been flipped upside down, I invite you to this promise: that all things are possible with God.

What might it look like for us to receive this offering? To move in love? And to believe that we are enough as we sit on this pew, or on our couch at home? To not succumb to the pressures and the standards of our society, but to traverse and expand beyond them? If we are able to practice seeing ourselves as God sees us, perhaps we too will be able to sing the high note, as Elphaba does.

I offer you these following truths, beloved. May you remember that we are enough. May we remember that our inheritances are not earned. May we remember that we are able to hold multiple identities at once. To choose people over profit. That there can be healing in grief. And that reaching out lovingly to our neighbors is what we are called to do. And as we discern our calls with God, may we continue to think through how we might offer our possessions and our gifts, whether in song or donation, in all forms or fashion, that we may co-create with God the Kingdom here and now.

That said, this work can only be done in relationship. And as we continue to deepen in relationship, remember the cross as we look vertically up to God, and horizontally to those in our communities, to our neighbors. May we remember, beloved, that grace abounds in this.

I close with this sung offering from “Wicked,” because relationship is the key. “Because I knew you, because I knew you, I have been changed for good.” May it be so.

*Our guest pastor: An advocate & artist born and groomed in the suburbs of Atlanta, JaQuan Beachem is a 2021 Master of Divinity graduate of Yale Divinity School. JaQuan is a Member in Discernment with the United Church of Christ currently serving as the Director of Community Development & Spiritual Formation at Andover Newton Seminary at Yale.*