

Lectionary 28 (B)
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Text: Mark 10:17-31

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When I was in grade school, my favorite game was dodge ball. I loved how fast the game moved, how you had to keep your head on a swivel, and you never knew when you'd have to duck or dodge or jump to escape being hit by a ball. There was a girl in my class, her name was Laurel, and she was the most amazing dodge ball player. I remember one time, everyone else on her team had been knocked out of the game, and all the players on the other team were trying to hit her. Balls were coming at her from every direction, and Laurel was ducking and jumping and making everyone miss. Of course, they eventually got her, but she kept the game going for what seemed like forever, and she made the other team work for it.

I thought of dodge ball this week because I was wondering whether, after listening to Jesus' words about how it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, our first impulse might not be to duck and dodge. I know my first impulse is to dodge. I'm not rich, so those words can't possibly apply to me! But even if we are far from rich compared to our neighbors here, when we look at the global human family, we know we are, in fact, rich. People have been trying to dodge Jesus' words and dodge their implications from the beginning, starting with the wealthy young man who couldn't even imagine giving up his wealth to follow Jesus. Some of the best dodges, though, have come from Christians who want a relationship with Jesus, but don't want to examine their relationship with money. Perhaps you've heard this dodge—the eye of the needle that Jesus was referring to was a low gate that that a camel could pass through only on its knees... which means that the rich can enter the kingdom of God on their knees, with a pious and prayerful life! There's just one problem with this idea—there's no evidence that any such gate ever existed at all. It's a dodge.

But here's one of the lessons I learned playing dodge ball. Sometimes it's better to try to catch the ball than it is to try escape it. And I wonder whether we might try that tactic with Jesus' words this morning—try to catch them, trusting that there truly is a word of life and blessing for us here, because when the rich young man asked Jesus what he could do to inherit eternal life, his question was sincere. And Jesus honored his sincerity with honesty. Jesus looked at him with love, and answered him with love. And when we come with open hearts to hear what Jesus has to say to us through the words of scripture, Jesus speaks to us with love too. So for me, that means I should pay close attention to Jesus' answer, even if there's a part of me that's afraid of what it might mean. And I should try to catch what he has to say, even if it's difficult.

To begin with, as we try to discern what Jesus is saying to us, I think it's important to see that nowhere does Jesus imply that selling all you have and giving it to the poor is his directive for everyone. When Jesus calls Matthew the tax collector to be a disciple, he says only "Follow me," not "Sell all you have, give it to the poor and then follow me." When Jesus invites himself over to Zacchaeus' house, Zacchaeus says that if he has defrauded anyone, he will restore it four-fold, and he'll give half of his possessions to the poor—not all, only half. And Jesus says, "Today salvation has come to this house!" Even Peter, who says to Jesus, "Look, we've left

everything and followed you,” seems to have still retained the use of his house and his fishing boat. So if it doesn’t work to dodge Jesus’ words by saying, “We’re not rich,” it also doesn’t work to say, “The only way to life with God is by giving everything away.” Instead, we have this unsettling story, and Jesus’ unsettling words about a camel going through the eye of a needle—which has got to be hard on the camel! So then, what do we do? What does Jesus want from us?

I think Jesus wants to give us a warning—a life-giving warning. He wants us to see the potential for wealth to be dangerous to a person’s spiritual life. Jesus might as well have said, “Everything you think you know about wealth and possessions is wrong.” But it’s such a completely counter-intuitive message that it may take us a bit to unpack what Jesus means. Perhaps we can picture what can make wealth dangerous with three images—a shield, a fun-house mirror, and a vacuum.

Wealth can be like a shield. It can protect us from many of life’s difficulties. It can make the road a little less bumpy—which is a good thing! But it’s only a short step then to imagining that wealth can protect us from anything. And it can make us forget that life is only a temporary gift. And when we forget that we receive this gift of life from God only for a time, and in the end we must surrender it, and we are accountable to God for how we use it—when we forget those basic truths because of the power of wealth to shield us from some of the small bumps in life, then that’s dangerous.

Wealth can also be like a fun-house mirror that distorts what we see, like the one that stretches my legs out long, and shrinks my body down. And wealth is able to fool me into thinking that all I have really belongs to me by stretching out my hard work, and shrinking down the bounty of God’s creation and how much we depend on others to make our success possible. And when we forget how interconnected we are, and how everything we have comes from God and belongs to God, and how we are stewards of what God has entrusted to us, then that’s dangerous.

Wealth can also be like a vacuum. It is able to suck up all of the energy and attention we have to give. We have to think about where to invest our money, and worry how to protect it, and plan what we’ll do with it, and dream of what we would do if we had more. It becomes more difficult then, there’s less time and energy then, to pay attention to the needs of others. When wealth sucks up all my attention, it’s harder to notice my neighbor or their needs, and it’s certainly harder to love my neighbor as myself, and that’s dangerous.

What Jesus wants for us is for us to experience eternal life—a life full of a sense of God’s presence, a life that begins now and is brought to fulfillment in the life to come. Jesus wants for us to experience the freedom, peace and happiness that belong to the children of God. Wealth can’t give us those things. And Jesus wants us to be so aware of the potential dangers of wealth that we don’t fall under its spell because...

When we don't imagine that wealth is our shield of protection, then we'll know in our bones that we have this life only as a gift from God, and only for a time. We are centered by the realization that we are creatures, not the Creator. We are freed from our own grandiosity.

And when we aren't fooled by the distorted image of life that that wealth shows us, like a fun-house mirror, when we see that God blesses us every minute of every day with incredible gifts of life and abilities and relationships and food and shelter and a beautiful world to live in, then we are centered with a profound sense of gratitude. How good is God to bless us so richly! And even more, we recognize that we have a profoundly important purpose in life—to further God's purposes of justice and compassion with all that God has entrusted to us.

And when wealth isn't able to vacuum up all of our energy and attention, we'll find the most amazing freedom and joy. The happiest, most interesting people I've ever known were people who were incredibly generous with their time and energy and money. They were free to spend their attention and care on others, and every one of them was an incredible force for good in the world.

The rich man who came to Jesus, his wealth was a barrier that separated him from his neighbors. It prevented him from recognizing how he was connected to them, from seeing that life with God is all about connection, about finding our truest life in loving relationships and investing ourselves in ways that build up community. I don't have any trouble imagining how Jesus' invitation to sell everything and give the money to the poor must have stirred up fear in that man's heart. I'm sure he thought his life was defined, in a good way, by his status and wealth, rather than limited, in a bad way, by his status and wealth.

For us, then, who live in a society where everything is about money, how will we deal with our possessions and our wealth and not be fooled by them? One way is to use them as best we can to make this world better, to let God work through us for justice; to make sure that everyone is treated with dignity; to make sure all of God's children have what they need to live. We can use all that God has entrusted to us in ways that reinforce our sense of connection to others—because life with God is all about connection. I'm sure it will mean shearing what we have—giving generously, maybe even sacrificially. Maybe we'll support an organization like First Immanuel that exists to shape our lives by the story and values of Jesus. Or maybe we'll give to an organization like Rose Haven or Bread for the World that exists to do Jesus' ongoing work in the world. This is an important part of how we experience the kind of life Jesus wanted the rich man to experience—one that is so connected that it is full of joy and meaning and purpose. Jesus' words today are really challenging. But don't dodge them. Catch them and take them into your heart to reflect your relationship with money, and on the sort of spiritual life, the sort of freedom and peace and joy that you really do want. And remember that nothing is impossible for God. Thanks be to God. Amen.