

20th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 10.10.21

Hebrews 4:12-16

Indeed, 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. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account. Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

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?"¹⁸ Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.¹⁹ 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." "²⁰ He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth."²¹ 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."²² 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!"²⁴ 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!²⁵ 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."²⁶ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?"²⁷ 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."²⁹ 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,³⁰ 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.³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." (511)

I bought a boat, a single rowing shell. I've thought about buying one for a few years now. Since 2014 I've been a member of Berkshire Community Rowing. A small club on Onota Lake in Pittsfield, we've got now two very modest boathouses filled with very used rowing shells. Franken-boats, I call them, because none of them are boats with any integrity. All of them are composites, comprised of parts from here and there glued and screwed and grooved together.

Lately, though, the club's been growing in members, which makes it more difficult to reserve a boat. Most people like to row during the prime hours, 6-8 AM, before the wind kicks up or the workday starts. And it's good that the club is growing. We actually have high aims for what

could be as far as “BCR” goes. Things like rowing clubs often become key in the renewing of struggling small cities. But having more members makes it harder to get a reservation.

So, this year, back in July, I placed my order.

It would take three to four months to make it, a university ahead of me in line with a bunch of 8+’s on order.

It came this past week, and it is so beautiful, so much fun to row.

It can only be understood as an extravagance. Rowing shells are expensive and aren’t in any way useful. They’re also a hassle to own. You need a good place for storing it, and a special rack for transporting it.

These have all been reasons why not to buy in seasons past.

More so is the fact that I know several people who, when having bought their own shells, end up rowing less than before. The club aspect of it, the social aspect: it’s part of the appeal, even when it feels like the least appealing part. Now that you’ve got your own shell, you don’t even need to belong to a club, don’t even need to deal with people, and people can be difficult. As for rowers, they can be crazy. It’s not for nothing, the saying, hell is other people. Funny thing: Jesus seems here to be saying quite the opposite, that the kingdom of God is other people.

This man who approached him: he ran up to Jesus. He *ran* up to him, which wasn’t an ordinary thing to do. It wasn’t even an acceptable thing to do. According to one New Testament scholar, for a man to run would involve him holding up his tunic so as not to trip on it. But in so doing, he’d expose his ankles and legs, which wasn’t the custom. The whole thing was unseemly.

Which might suggest it was a matter of desperation for this man to speak with Jesus. Like the woman who approached Jesus if only to touch the hem of his cloak, like the woman who approached Jesus and tolerated him basically calling her a dog, so many of these people seem really desperate, as if Jesus is their last hope.

And so, it was for each of those women. One had had a hemorrhage for twelve years, and no doctor she ever saw could make it stop. The other had a daughter who was on the brink of death. Desperation. Their last hope.

It might seem at first glance such was the case for this man, too. But, you know, his request, on second thought, seems quite a bit less pressing. “Eternal life.” He wanted eternal life. It seems almost frivolous.

It seems all the more so when you consider it in the larger context of this gospel, Mark, or for that matter in the still larger context of the three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

The only time “eternal life” comes up in all of these is with this man, in this story, some form of which is featured in all three narratives. Everywhere else, what this man might have meant by “eternal life” is called the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven—which is indeed what Jesus turns it into in his response to the man. The man has asked about “eternal life,” and Jesus answers in terms of the “kingdom of God.” So, there’s some correlation here.

But that just makes the difference between the two all the more revealing. One sets as central the on-goingness of the man—“eternal life.” The other sets as central God—“the Kingdom of God.” The former implies as its principal aim the eternal existence of any given ego, the other implies as its principal aim the eternal fact of God’s sovereignty and presence, and what this then promises for all being in such divine presence.

The more I think about it, the more crucial that distinction seems.

This man’s request is *really* self-involved.

And then there’s the way he makes it. “Good teacher...” That’s an uncommon way of addressing someone, in the words of one scholar, “very rare in Jewish literature.” *Didaskale agathe*: it’s likely meant as flattery. That’s what another scholar citing still other scholars claims. Employing a lofty title for Jesus, this man was likely expecting a lofty title in return, in accordance with custom. Like that scene from the 80s comedy *Spies Like Us*, when all those anthropologists were meeting one another, “Doctor. Doctor. Doctor. Doctor.”

This man though, he doesn’t get it, an honorific in return. Really, if honorifics are what this man was after, then Jesus isn’t interested. On the contrary: “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.”

This has set centuries of theologians into overdrive. Why would Jesus imply such separation from God? Why would Jesus imply he was so very distinct from God?

Really, if Jesus is the presence of God manifest, which Mark’s gospel especially seems to take him to be, if Jesus is the reign of God come near, which is the central proclamation Mark makes about Jesus, then why would Jesus draw such a line of distinction between himself and the God whom he was so apparently and immediately making present—causing all evil to take flight, causing all darkness to come to light, causing all unhealth to be worked out leaving behind all creation now complete, made whole? Why would Jesus disclaim for himself a being good?

Why, but that he had no interest in being flattered?

And why would he have no interest in flattery? Why no interest in this, what Shakespeare's Cordelia, honest, quiet, called when speaking of her father King Lear, who was eager to be flattered, a "glib and oily art"?

Or how about how Plutarch understood it? Writing, around the same time Mark wrote his gospel, Plutarch claimed flattery was to enact friendship without actually offering friendship.

Or how about what political theorist, Daniel Kapust, claims, that this mere enacting of friendship deprives the flattered of one essential benefit of friendship, that "of frank speech."

Jesus, though, wouldn't do that—wouldn't deprive this man of frank speech. He wouldn't do that to anyone, it seems, but not also to this man, and perhaps because he loved him.

The text makes special note of that, that Jesus looked at him and loved him, something not said of Jesus in response to anyone else in all his encounters. This isn't to say Jesus didn't love others too, just to say the texts of these encounters had no need to say as much.

Here, though, there was apparently such a need, clearly to state that Jesus loved this though obsequious man.

So, frank speech: "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.'" And, yes, it's strange that Jesus would add to this list something that isn't a commandment: "You shall not defraud." But maybe this man's obsequious manner suggested to Jesus he was dealing with someone who just might practice fraud, was indeed practicing fraud with this very encounter: "*Good teacher.*" And so this new, if though long implied, commandment: "No defrauding."

The man was pretty sure he was in the clear.

That said, he lacked one thing.

What that one thing was, Jesus didn't say.

Apparently, it was to be found in the man selling everything he owned, giving the money to the poor, and joining the disciples in following Jesus.

It's worth noting that Jesus didn't say this to everyone he came across. He didn't even say it to every rich or powerful person he came across. There was something about this man and what his having many possessions had done to him that highlighted the fact that it's hard for wealthy people to enter the kingdom of God.

For what it's worth, I'm convinced this is true.

For what it's worth also, I know myself to be wealthy so I'm especially alert to the risks.

For what it's worth, I don't think entry into the kingdom of God is some prize you win for doing what's been asked of you, or even doing what's been *commanded* of you. The kingdom of heaven isn't something we achieve, contrary to how this man seems to think of it. I think the kingdom of heaven is a realm ever open to us, a realm, a paradigm, an experience that we might feel ourselves to be living amidst at any given moment for it itself is a gift, a gift of this ever-presence, ever-present. It's the gift of life, which we neither produce nor manage. It's the gift of our lives, which we neither earn nor deserve. It's the gift of this day, which I've been praying less lately that I ever seize the day and more that I simply receive the day, whatever it is that arrives and is offered.

And, for what it's worth, I think wealth prohibits such reception because it protects us from living so very out of control, so very in a posture of reception rather than agency and management and achievement and control.

Did you know that one trend to map exactly with a societal increase in wealth is the decrease in multi-generational households? Apparently, the wealthier we get, the less likely we are to live with our adult children as we age, or with aging parents as we ourselves might become parents, little kids being raised by their grandparents or great aunts and uncles and the like. And on any given day, this makes life easier. Living in multi-generation households is stressful and irritating. Living as so-called nuclear families or even single-generational households means kids can be kids and adults can be adults and aging people can age in peace and quiet. However, as a trend, this becomes a privation. It makes life lonelier, makes people less happy because we've simply swapped out one stressor for another. There are fewer complicated relationships to manage and find grating, but there's less slack in a household system when for when a kid gets a cold and can't go to school, or something like.

Turns out privacy is a sort of privation, even deprivation. This great prize of the American way of life: privacy, private property: it's classically been understood as akin to deprivation.

I sometimes imagine this self-sufficient man who has *kept* all the commandments and now wants eternal life. I imagine him imagining his life without the privacy and control his wealth has bought him. I imagine him noticing the crowd of people also following Jesus, those whom he's been commanded to join—the disciples and apostles, men and women and even children, noisy, clamorous, bickering, hungry, generous, funny, creative and energizing and smart, alive! I imagine him then giving a thought to what it would be like to join up with this dirty, smelly, strange, witty group, to surrender his privacy and control to this whole nutty thing—discussing, bickering,

praying, singing, breaking bread, walking along, bickering some more. I imagine him thinking it through and realizing he can't do it. He simply can't—and then going away shocked, grieving.

I went on a retreat a couple weeks ago. I joined up with the Lee church's women's retreat to see about leading one for Lenox and Monterey. The conference of our denomination has a perfect place for retreat, an hour or so away, on a lake in northwestern Connecticut. Maybe it'd be fun to do an overnight for our congregations. Bedrooms were dorm-style. They were also plentiful. I started the night sharing a room. After an hour or so of being awake and aware, I moved to a room alone. I fell asleep right away, though not before feeling disappointed that I just couldn't do it.

Hell is other people, right?

Jesus seems to say, no, that's the kingdom of heaven. Enter at your own risk.

Have you heard that school children are this year getting in more fights than usual? I've heard it anecdotally from a few teachers I know. I've seen stories about it from local news sources. I've listened to reporting on it in the national news. One clinical psychologist interviewed for one story out of Syracuse, New York, said that, following the year most school children had during the height of the pandemic, on-line, isolated, hardly going out beyond their own households, it's as if they're having to re-learn how to be in the world again, how to tolerate the mild irritations that simply are other people, the sort of stuff we were all used to because it was our everyday.

Turns out all those little social interactions that used to make up any given day: they were abrasive just enough to keep us tolerant, not to say tough, not so easily ticked off. They were just abrasive enough to keep sociability smooth.

But we've gone more than a year without all that.

It's a loss not only of one another. It's a loss also of ourselves, as we are ourselves creations of one another, gifts of one another. We are gifts of those who make us feel good, and maybe more so of those who get on our nerves.

What a gift those people are, the people who get on our nerves.

Lately I've been wondering what is the church. The question is always there for someone like me to ask. Ecclesiology, it's called, the study of the nature and purpose of the church, and how such things are expressed in its practices, *our* practices.

Lately, though, my wondering has been more pressing, wondering almost if the tremendous effort of keeping the church going is at all worth it. Because it is a tremendous effort.

Especially in the congregational tradition, it's a tremendous effort. It comes down to us to do it—to us here in this room.

Is it worth it?

What even is it?

Well, living as we do in this wealthy society, having as we do the real option for the living of our days near constant privacy, unencumbered by people who would just do things slightly differently than we would, maybe one thing the church offers—one *real* thing, to be felt even in this immediate now—is relationship, and not just with people who are like us, and not just with people who *like* us and whom we like, but with anyone within reach of this place, anyone who might come through the church doors whenever they're open and decide for themselves, "Yes, this is my place. I'm bringing myself here."

Turns out we need people to do this to do us, *for* us. If any one of us has any hope of ever entering the kingdom of heaven, where self-sufficiency makes us (ironically) insufficient, where the winning of privacy casts us as at a terrible loss, then we need other people to come along and get on our nerves a little bit. This will make us nervy. This will make us more open to the kingdom which does indeed show up at any given moment to claim us, to occupy us, to fill our hearts with the nervy move in saying, God saying, "This is my place. I'm bringing myself here."

Turns out, we lack one thing—and, lo!, here it is.

Thanks be to God.