

Proper 23, Year B
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St. Charles Ave Presbyterian Church
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Mark 10:17-31

“Good Enough”

This past week Forbes released their annual Forbes 400 List of the Richest People in America. I found it interesting to learn that the cut off this year to make this list is a net worth of at least 2.9 Billion dollars. The people who made the list range from the usual suspects of Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates to folks we wouldn't recognize if they passed us on the street, but whose products or services we probably use everyday. They are retailers, investment bankers, energy tycoons, and tech titans of industry. Quite a few are remarkable philanthropists, using their wealth to help solve the world's greatest challenges from climate change to hunger to curing diseases and increasing access to health care. So when Jesus talks about “the first shall be last, and the last shall be first,” and how “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,” I have to admit, my first thought, from my comfortable middle class seat, is that Jesus must be talking about those kinds of people. Those on the Fortune 400 list, those in the top 1%, because surely he can't be talking about me? He can't be talking us, can he?

One of the uncomfortable truths of the scriptures and Jesus' teachings is that he reserves some of his more pointed critiques and judgements for those who are wealthy. This story of the man “who had many possessions” appears not only here in Mark's gospel, but versions of it also appear in Matthew and Luke's gospels as well, giving us an indication that this was a very pivotal encounter in Jesus' ministry. Wealth, money, possessions, according to Jesus present a significant barrier to those seeking the Kingdom of God. Now I don't think it's because money and possessions are inherently “evil” in and of themselves, but it certainly matters the position these things occupy in our lives, where we place the importance all the trappings of our success and accomplishments. At the heart of Jesus' request of the man is a question we must also ask ourselves - do we derive our worth from our net worth or do we truly rely on God in all things and is God's love where we find our value?

When the man approaches Jesus asking his question, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” it seems pretty obvious, that he was a good guy, a guy who had it all together. Not only was he reported to have many possessions, but he tells Jesus that he has been faithful in keeping God’s commandments since his youth – particularly the ones about treating others rightly and fairly. He’s clearly a man of integrity, one who has surely curried favor with God because of the good life he’s led. The prevailing wisdom of the time would say that this man’s wealth and possessions were indeed clear signs of God’s favor and blessing. It’s no wonder that the disciples were perplexed, astounded, and just generally confused when Jesus says that it is hard for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God. Because if the wealthy, who are supposed to be blessed by God for leading lives worthy of blessing, if they cannot enter the Kingdom of God, then who can?

In the television show, *The Good Place*, a sitcom thinly veiled as a treatise on moral ethics and philosophy, the main character Elenore Shelstrop in the very first moments of the show is dead, beginning her afterlife in “next plane of existence,” known as “The Good Place.” It’s not quite heaven, but the gist is that it’s the place where people who were good on earth, having earned enough positive points from their good deeds, get to go when they die. As she becomes oriented to her new home, Elenore meets Tahani Al-Jamil her neighbor, who lives in the obscenely enormous mansion next door. Tahani breezes on to the scene the absolute picture of beauty, grace, and sophistication. On the surface, Tahani appears to be incredibly kind and welcoming, assuming the role of consummate hostess for all the events in the Good Place. We learn that she earned her place in the Good Place through her tireless philanthropy, raising 60 billion dollars for charity in her short lifetime. These accomplishments and qualities grate on Elenore, who come to find out has actually been put into “the Good Place” by mistake, and Tahani’s seemingly perfect life and good character just rubs it in, poking at all of Elenore’s insecurities and highlighting just how much she doesn’t belong. However, in due time we see that Tahani’s thin veneer of perfection begins to crack and show forth her true character. She is a master of the backhanded compliment and of the humble brag, casually name dropping and working into conversation her education at Oxford and the Sorbonne, her best friend Beyonce, and her godparents Lady Diana and Paul McCartney. When it is revealed that Tahani doesn’t

belong in the Good Place either, she is truly shocked and appalled! She had to have been a good person! Look at her life and all the good she did in her charity work. A series of flashbacks reveals that Tahani was actually a vain, vapid, and shallow narcissist, whose only motivation in raising those funds for charity were fame, accolade, attention, and approval – particularly from her withholding parents.

Jesus came to declare to reign of God on earth and in his teachings he is constantly flipping our values, our notions of blessing and worth on their head. He warns us against hustling God with the things that we value, rather than letting God show us that which God values. Perhaps Tahani herself summarizes it well in this insight that she eventually gleans from hard learned lessons and the healing love of her eventual friendship with Elenore, *“The problem is, if all you care about in the world is the velvet rope, you will always be unhappy, no matter which side you’re on.”* When we look for approval, value, and worth, anywhere but in God and as God’s children, we will always come up short, will never be satisfied, and we will never truly find our place in God’s kingdom.

The truth is none of us have earned a spot in “the good place” or “eternal life” or “the kingdom of God.” But we do belong in the Kingdom of God; because we belong to God. God’s blessings are not signs and symbols of how good we, but of how good God is. When we know deep in our bones, deep in our heart of hearts, that we are indeed enough – valued, beloved, and worthy to God, just as we are; we can rest in that knowledge. Rest from the hustle of being good, being the best, and earning our keep. We can hold loosely our material possessions and instead hold tightly to relationships. The blessings of our lives become shared blessings with the whole community. And indeed we have our reward, as Jesus says, of brothers and sisters, children, mothers and father – friends like family that we can turn to; of houses and fields – places to call home and to feel safe, and work to give us purpose and joy. This is the Kingdom of God that Jesus invites us into, these are the treasures of our inheritance. Jesus says, “no one is good, but God.” And I say to us now, because God is good, we are enough.