

“The Almost Apostle”
Mark 10:17-31
Job 23
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“I cannot see him.” Job can’t find God. Do you ever feel that way? You wonder where God is? Things are just not going the way you hoped, not turning out the way you expected, and you wonder if God is even around at all. Where is God when you feel like that? Where is God anyway? Is he up in heaven looking down on us, looking at everything we do? Is he the cosmic judge, the universal caretaker watching out for all of creation? But what about when things go wrong? That’s what Job asks, where is God now? For him things had gone very wrong. He had lost all his wealth, lost his family, lost his health, even his wife lamented with him, “Job, why don’t you just curse God and die? But he doesn’t, he still looks for God, still searches for him, but God feels so distant. “I go forward, he is not there, or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.”

This is also the experience of many people today. They don’t know and certainly don’t experience the God that they were taught about in Sunday School. And they don’t know how to relate to God when they’ve been taught that God is all loving yet their modern experience is of 9-11 and Sandy Hook and Roseburg, Oregon. Like Job they wonder where God is. Is God up in his heaven and has left us alone down here? Or is God somewhere else? So many people feel distant from God, or feel like God was never there to begin with. Especially the younger generations, they see no need of church because they have not found God here, so maybe there is no God. What they feel is the absence of God. **They don’t even ask the question of eternal life because they first need to address the question of God in the here and now.**

And that brings us to the rich young man in the Gospel of Mark. He also feels an absence; there's something lacking in his life, and he's not sure what it is. So he asks to Jesus: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" That's an interesting question. What must that have meant for a first century Jew in Judea? Does he mean how do I get to heaven? What must I do to be saved? What happens after I die? Although there was and is a belief in the afterlife, traditional Judaism places such an emphasis on **God's presence in** the here and now that most Jews, especially in the time of Jesus, didn't focus heavily on the afterlife. It was and is generally believed still, that one received blessings in their present life for being right with God. The lesson of Job and the harsh warnings about the trappings of wealth issued by Jewish prophets aside, the common teaching in the Hebrew Scriptures is that if we behave well, if we follow God's law, God will bless us. Therefore the belief during Jesus time was that if a person was powerful, or had many children, or had a lot of money, then they were obviously a good person because God was blessing them. That belief has not gone away. We still struggle to relieve ourselves of this notion, Christian ministries based on the idea of the Prosperity Gospel remain very attractive—especially since the recession hit in 2008 and taken together, these ideas continue to perpetuate the notion that God's blessing comes through personal wealth. If you believe enough, if you follow Jesus, God will give you all the money you need, right?

So here, back in the first century, this man, a rich man, is comforted in knowing he is blessed and right with God, Jesus even affirms his assertion of righteousness using the measuring stick of the Ten Commandments. But there is something that is troubling the man and he no longer assumes that after death he will remain in good standing with God. He wants to know what he must do to secure his good standing in the next life. As we said, this was not a typical Jewish concern of his day. But Jesus—this radical preacher--is promising that the Kingdom of God is near¹ and so this man, no longer willing to

1 Mark 1:15

rest on his laurels, wants to know that he will have a place in this kingdom. He's heard Jesus; he hangs on every word; he even appears ready to follow him. But first, he must know, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

The Bible tells us that Jesus looked at him and loved him. He looked him in the eyes. Jesus really sees him and he loves him. It occurred to me this week, as I read this passage again after reading it more times than I can count in my lifetime that I thought there was certainly a connection here and I wondered: was this man a potential apostle in Jesus' eyes? Was he more than just a devoted follower (Jesus had plenty of followers) worthy to be part of that inner circle, an addition to the twelve? Of course there were Peter and Andrew, James and John, Philip and Simon and Matthew and the rest. Jesus had called them, "Come, follow me." With Peter and Andrew and James and John, when Jesus called them from their boats on the Sea of Galilee, we are told that they dropped everything and followed him. Matthew was a tax collector and left his tax booth and followed him. And the rest of them left things behind them as they followed Jesus out on the road. And likewise, there seems to be a special intimacy with this man.

But this man has an impediment, there's something blocking him from following Jesus: he's rich.

He had everything going for him. Wealth gives an advantage. Money provides opportunities, it opens doors, it may not buy happiness but the wealthy simply do not share the day to day worries that are common to the poor. In the other Gospels, Matthew describes the man as young. While Luke describes him as a ruler. So, as a young, wealthy, and politically powerful man in that culture, it seems that he had every advantage a man could have. Most importantly, he was a good man. Let's be clear about this. When Jesus quotes to him from the Ten Commandments, he says confidently that he has obeyed all these things from his youth. He's a good man. But notice, Jesus quotes to him the

commands from the second table. If you remember the commandments, they are traditionally divided into two tables: four commandments that deal with our relationship with God and then six that cover our relationships with each other. Those latter commands are the ones that Jesus quotes to our almost apostle: Honor your Father and Mother, don't kill, don't steal, don't commit adultery, don't bear false witness. And our young man says he has obeyed all of those—he has been caring about his relationships with his family, his neighbors, his community. But he still feels an absence. Did you notice the first table of commands are not mentioned. Does Jesus somehow know that therein lies his problem? **“You shall have no other gods. You shall not use God's name in vain. You shall not make any idols. Keep the Sabbath.”** Is there something in there that is a stumbling block for this man? Is there something in there that keeps him from following Jesus? There is. Those commands are really about who or what you put first in your life. Do you put God first or do you put something else? Is there something in his life that he values more than God?

The Almost Apostle has a problem. He walks away crying because he has split loyalties. He wants to follow Jesus, but he doesn't want to give up his old life, he doesn't want to give up his possessions. His heart is split between his money and his desire to follow Jesus.

Actually the story of the rich young ruler, the story that I've dubbed the Almost Apostle, is not really about a rich man in first century Judea. It's a story about us. We are the Almost Apostle. What is it that is in us that keeps us from fully following Jesus when he calls? What is it that we want to hold on to that actually holds us back? What is it that we think is our greatest blessing that ends up being a stumbling block on our way? Is it our money? Is that where our security lies? Is it our independence? Were we so strongly raised in the belief that we should be able to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps that we will never ask anyone for help, even God? Who is god in our lives other than God? Is it family, or nation, or political ideology? Is it pleasure, or material gain, or success in the eyes of

our family and friends? What is it that we would sacrifice everything for?

I asked you to not give all your money away today during the 2-Cents a Meal offering. I asked you to hold on to one penny or dime or quarter or dollar. Take it out now. Look at it. What four words appear on all the money printed in this country. Right there over Lincoln's head or under Roosevelt's chin or in front of Jefferson's face. *In God we trust*. How do you understand those words? Are they a proclamation that our nation trusts in God? Are they a prayer that we might trust in God again as we should? How do you understand those words? Let me suggest that they might be a challenge. Not just to the nation, but to each of us. When those words are printed on the currency and coins of our nation, maybe they are a challenge to us to affirm that our ultimate loyalty is not to the nation, not to money or wealth, not even to ourselves, but to God. In God we trust. Do we? What would it mean if we really trusted in God? What it would look like to trust God with this money? How would we spend our money this week if we trusted God? What would we buy? What would we refrain by buying? What would we save, and for what purpose? And what would we give - how much and to whom? What would it mean if we trusted God with our lives? With our jobs? What would it mean if the one thing we lacked was real trust in God?

We are heading into stewardship season this year and I wanted to begin to talk about it today because we don't always realize that stewardship is not about money. It is about trust. In whom do we trust?

Are we Almost Apostles? Or when Jesus says, "Come follow me," are we ready? That's a scary thing. It is frightening in this world of ours in which things happen too fast, change comes too quickly, and it seems that there is no security in the things we have always trusted. Like Job, it is sometimes hard to see where God is in all the crazy things going on around us. But we meet Jesus in the same place the Almost Apostle met him, on the road, because he is always going on ahead of us. As my favorite author

Frederick Buechner says,

“My question is this: Are there in us, in you and me now, that recklessness of the loving heart, that wild courage, that crazy gladness in the face of darkness and death, that shuddering faithfulness even unto the end of the world, through which the new things can come to pass?”²

What's holding us back? What's keeping us from God? What's stopping us from following Christ.

What is blocking us from knowing God here and now? I hope nothing.