

“What’s Your One Thing?”

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October 13, 2024

Amos 5

Mark 10:17-31

Halloween is coming! And though I have family members who strongly believe in ghosts, I personally do not believe in ghosts. If you want to believe in them, help yourself. But I have warned my loved ones, that if I do not come back and visit them after I die, please don’t take it personally. Know that any lack of visitation from me does not take away from the fact that I love you very, very much. One of my loved ones said, “Okay, but promise me, if you’ve died and get the chance to come back and visit your loved ones, don’t just say, ‘Oh, no, I don’t believe in ghosts.’”

I *don’t* believe in ghosts, but I do believe that some things can *haunt* you. I’ve been thinking about this fact as a preacher, especially as I have been reading *The Message* by Ta-Nahesi Coates this past week. He begins by describing the craft of writing for transformation. He calls this *haunting*. As he describes it, “it’s never enough for the reader of your words to be convinced. The goal is to *haunt*—to have them think about your words before bed, see them manifest in their dreams, tell their partner about them the next morning, to have them grab random people on the street, shake them and say, ‘Have you read this yet?’”¹

Jesus’ words certainly *haunted* the rich man who came to see him that day. And perhaps they will haunt us, too. Being haunted is not a bad thing. But it is not an easy thing, either, because being haunted by a word just might invite you to change your life.

Look closer with me at these haunting words.

“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” The physics of that is pretty daunting. If you are rich, this news leaves you discouraged, if not grieving-- just as we found the man in

¹ Ta-naheesi Coates, *The Message*. New York: Random House, 2024. p. 5

the gospel passage at the end of today's story, after Jesus suggested that he sell all he owns, give the proceeds to the poor, and then to go, and follow Jesus.

And we can easily conjure up the super rich- we hear about them in the news, we see one run for president. Can you imagine Jesus delivering this news to Elon Musk? He would probably try to fund an invention that could get a camel through a needle. To be fair, Elon Musk has signed something called The Giving Pledge—that is, a promise to give away at least half your income in *this* lifetime. Even still: if Musk were to do that today, that would put him at 10th richest person in the world, according to Forbes Magazine. If he were to then give away half again, it would put him at 25th richest person, and again, he would be at 50th richest person in the world. That's right; if the richest person in the world gave away half his income, three times over, he would still be the 50th richest person in the world. No one needs that much wealth.

As for the rich man in the gospel text, we have someone who seemingly has all he needs, both materially and spiritually-- and yet, he reaches out to Jesus for something more, in addition to his wealth. The Roman empire during Jesus' time had a stratified system of wealth and class. Only about 2-3% of the population belonged to the wealthy elite, and about 80-90% lived in some level of poverty. "Wealth-- and status and power-- were conspicuously displayed in housing, furnishings, ownership of numerous slaves, clothing, food, entertainment... and public good works that secured public honor." ²

We find out that he has done the basic criteria required by his Jewish faith to keep to the commandments-- or at least, he thinks he has: '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.' All but one of these are from the Ten Commandments; but Jesus slides in an extra commandment: "You shall not defraud" which means you shouldn't cheat other people.

I grew up at a church with a lot of people like this man. No, they did not own slaves, but their ancestors did-- and truth be told, so did mine. The gleaming cars in the parking lot showed the wealth of the faithful there. I made the

² Warren Carter, Barbara E. Reid, editor, *Wisdom Commentary: Mark* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019) p. 422.

mistake, as many people trying to practice Christianity do, of believing that **wealth** was a sign of God's favor: that if you were faithful and did what God asks of you, then God would reward you with success, money, and an easy life.

And so, I was self-conscious of the dress shoes I wore to church that pinched my toes because they were much too small for my growing feet. I was especially ashamed when we lost our home after my mom struggled with long bouts of unemployment; that was a story which I couldn't even bring myself to tell anybody at my church at the time it happened. Somehow, I figured, we must have failed at faithfulness in order to be struggling the way we were.

It was not until a few years later, when I started volunteering as an overnight host at a church homeless shelter, that I made the connection that much of Jesus' ministry had been tending to those at the margins. He had been healing the lame. Casting out demons. Stopping a mob of men who are about to stone a woman who had been caught in adultery. Feeding the hungry. Welcoming the children. He himself was imprisoned, and executed by capital punishment. I awakened to the fact that being poor, being on the margins is not shameful. Instead, the existence of poverty in the shadow of great abundance that is not shared is what is shameful.

Jesus invites the rich man in Mark to participate in something that is part of the nature of *God's* empire. The Roman empire characterized relationships in a hierarchy-- whether from Emperor to subject, lord to servant, slave to master, husband to wife, father to son. But on the contrary, *God's* beloved community--which Jesus was presenting-- is characterized by *shared* treasure and relationships of mutual value, where the last will be first and the first will be last, because in *God's* empire, *each* life has sacred worth.

Status and wealth are not things the rich man is willing to walk away from-- at least, not yet. The story does not tell us where he ended up. I suspect he left haunted, though. Jesus never forced his opinions on the man; he simply offered an invitation, which the man denied at that moment. But that piece of emptiness that brought the man to question Jesus in the first place might continue tugging at him and all he had built his life around. The bible says no more about him, but we can wonder if he opened up space in his life to experience the salvation Jesus was trying to offer him.

We often think about salvation as something that happens in the life to come. But Jesus implies that salvation is not just about an afterlife; it is also about this life now. In verse 21, Jesus says, "Give your money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; *then* come, follow me." Salvation is not just about riches stored in heaven; salvation also comes from the change that happens in your life-- in *this* life, here and now-- from following Jesus.

And we may think Jesus' message is for the Elon Musks and the Donald Trumps of the world. But as easily as we might point fingers from this text, we must also consider it for ourselves. How can we know salvation if we are not willing to be changed? Jesus had told the man, "You lack one thing."

What is your one thing that is untouchable before God? For the rich man, it was his wealth. That may be so for many of us, but it also may be something else. Do you have anything so firmly lodged into your sense of self, that you're not willing to lose? What might it look like to loosen your grip on that and offer it to God? Each one of us is like the rich man, whether or not we have wealth, in that we came to church today because we are also looking for something more: whether it is to feel God's love, or to be seen or noticed by God, to be part of something bigger than ourselves; to release guilt or shame; to learn how to follow Jesus' care and justice; or simply how to be a better person. In our own ways, we are reaching for something that is just beyond what we can access on our own, and we need Jesus to show us how to get there. What is left to be decided is whether, if we are blessed enough to be shown the way, will we have the courage to follow?

Consider these moments as a breakthrough, where Jesus is tugging at the contours of our lives and inviting us into something that may be uncomfortable, even terrifying--- yes-- but may in fact lead us into fuller participation in the beloved community God is forming for us and through us.

As you think of what your one thing might be, let me offer you another clue about getting into the kingdom of God. I suspect it is nothing we can do on our own. The rich man made the mistake of thinking that there was something *he alone*

could *do* to inherit eternal life. If he had asked instead, how can I gather up the least of these, and together we enter the kingdom of God? I suspect that Jesus would have tossed the man the keys, or flung open the gate. Because the truth is, in God's beloved community, *aka* the kingdom of God, our well-being depends on the well being of the least of these. We cannot be free when someone else is oppressed. And so our project to attain success, our efforts to find salvation—whether that is material, or spiritual—cannot be ours alone. We need each other and we need God.