

# OPEN HANDS

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**MARK 10:17-31; HEBREWS 4:12-16**

**LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH**

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**OCTOBER 11, 2015/20<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (THANKSGIVING SUNDAY)**

I was speaking with a colleague yesterday morning and the conversation turned to what we were preaching on this Thanksgiving Sunday morning.

I said something to the effect of, “oh, you know, just trying to reconcile a Sunday where we focus on being thankful for all our stuff with Jesus’ command to go and sell all of our stuff.”

No big deal. 😊

Jesus says some hard things in his encounters with people in the gospels. And in this encounter from the gospel of Mark, he says some of his hardest things.

*Go and sell everything you have...*

*It’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.*

We hear these words and we (probably) squirm. And if we don’t, we probably should.

By almost any global calculus, we are rich. One billion people on this planet live on less than \$1.25 a day. Almost half the world lives on less than \$2.50 a day.

If we have food on the table, a roof over our heads, we are rich, probably within the top 10% of the planet when it comes to wealth.

We can try to say that the man in the story represents a different category of wealth. But if we are honest, it is virtually impossible, when we look at things on a global scale, for us to locate ourselves anywhere in this story but in the figure of the man asking the question.

So what do we do with this hard story that Jesus tells?

Particularly on *this* Sunday.

How do Jesus' words to this man fit within our typical Thanksgiving emphases upon gratitude for the material blessings (among others) that we enjoy.

(And which are so beautifully symbolized in this display at the front today!)

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Let's begin at the beginning. At man approaches Jesus with a question: *What must I do to inherit eternal life.*

Jesus responds, as he often does. A bit unpredictably. A bit enigmatically (*Why do you call me good?*).

And always with an eye to getting at the question *behind* the question.

He does this in a very interesting way. He points him back to the Jewish law, to the Ten Commandments. It's not the only time he does this. We might also think of Luke 10 when Jesus is faced with the same question from a lawyer. There, too, he begins by pointing to the heart of the law—love God, love your neighbour. When pressed further, he tells the uncomfortable story of the Good Samaritan!

Here, too, he points the man right back to the Jewish law.

*You know the commandments...*

But it's interesting Jesus to note which of the commandments Jesus mentions.

Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Honour your father and mother.

He focuses on the commandments that deal with how we are to relate to our fellow human beings, but he leaves aside the first four commandments which deal primarily with the question of right-relationship to God (I am the Lord your God... You shall have no other Gods before me... no graven images... don't take the name of the Lord in vain).

We'll come back to that.

The man responds, "I've done all these things since I was a child." *I've played by the rules.*

It is here that Jesus exposes the question behind the question. *One thing you lack. Go sell what you own and give the money to the poor. And you will have treasure in heaven; then come follow me.*

At this the man famously goes away grieving. *For he had many possessions.*

So what's going on here? Is Jesus anti-possessions? Does he expect all of his followers to be destitute?

I don't think so.

I think that if we pay attention to the way this conversation unfolds, we see in telling this man to sell everything and follow him Jesus was bringing things right back to the commandments that he *didn't* mention earlier.

*Ok, you say you've kept all the commandments since you were a boy? Well, let's see about that. There were a few commandments I didn't mention—commandments that I know that you know, too... Commandments about having no other gods before me. Let's test your theory that you've kept **all** the commandments. Sell what you have and follow me.*

Jesus' response to this man is not a template for all Christians at all times.

It is, I think, an expose of this man's devotion to his wealth, to his placing his possessions in the place that God alone is worthy of.

It is a response to the idolatry of stuff that comes so naturally to us as human beings.

The man went away sad, our text says. The text doesn't explicitly say why.

Perhaps he was sad because he was going to *do* what Jesus said—he was going to go sell everything. Maybe his sadness was born out of a recognition of just how costly this life of discipleship would really be, and an awareness of how he had placed possessions on the throne of his life. Maybe his sadness was a penitent one.

It's possible.

More likely, he went away sad because he wasn't willing to part with his stuff.

This is the most natural interpretation of his response. And it's natural because I think most of us can see ourselves in his sadness, at least on some level.

The reason that this story makes us squirm is because we, too, have many possessions, and we, too, are constantly tempted to place them on the throne of our lives.

Why?

What is it about stuff that makes it such an alluring idol? What is that our stuff gives us (or what is that we *imagine* our stuff gives us)?

Jesus says that it is harder for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Why?

What is it about stuff that proves so alluring?

Well, there are many things that we think our stuff gives us.

Security.

Identity.

Status.

Meaning.

Fulfillment.

Happiness.

Stuff has *always* posed a unique temptation toward idolatry because we quite easily convince ourselves that stuff can provide for us the things that, in reality, God alone can do.

God alone can provide the only security we need.

God alone can ground our identity in the deeper realities of love, forgiveness, and the promise of salvation.

God alone can meet our deepest need for meaning, fulfillment, and purpose.

God alone can root our lives in the joy we were made for.

But the human story is that of always tempted toward smaller gods.

Jesus puts it equally strongly in Matthew 6:24:

“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

We know this is true.

Not many people lie on their deathbeds thinking, “Gosh, I wish I would have worked a bit harder... made a bit more money... acquired a bit more stuff...”

Many people lie on their deathbeds thinking, “I wish I would have been a better spouse... a better parent... a better sister or brother... a better friend... I wish I would have devoted more of my time and energy to becoming a person who loves God and neighbour well.

David Brooks, a columnist at the *New York Times* describes this as a distinction between “resume virtues” and “eulogy virtues.”

We spend so much of our time focused on padding our resumes—developing the skills that will sell, acquiring and accumulating and boosting—and comparatively few on becoming the kinds of people who will be eulogized well at our funerals.<sup>1</sup>

And yet, the idols still hold their allure. As human beings, we have always been drawn, like a moth to a flame, to underperforming and inadequate gods, to gods that cannot save.

And this, perhaps, is why Jesus put things as strongly as he did in today's story. Jesus isn't against possessions. He knows that we need stuff to survive and thrive in the world; he knows that stuff can be a source of pleasure, a celebration of the good things that God has made and has seen fit to give us.

He's not against stuff *per se*. He is against all that would keep us away from the proper love and worship of God.

And when our *stuff* assumes the place of God in our lives? Well, then so much the worse for our stuff. It will have to go.

We will have to be taught to unclench hands that are constantly tempted to close around the things that we are tempted to think will save us, and to open them to God and others.

For our own sake.

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So, on this Thanksgiving Sunday, many of us will now go home to full tables and give thanks for the blessings we enjoy.

The blessings of food and shelter and clothing...

The blessings of health and strength...

The blessings of freedom and peace and the ability to vote...

The blessings of people who love us and people to love...

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/12/opinion/sunday/david-brooks-the-moral-bucket-list.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/12/opinion/sunday/david-brooks-the-moral-bucket-list.html?_r=0)

The blessings of meaningful work or hobbies...

The blessings of bikes and computers and coffee and comfortable chairs to read in and coffee and board games and quilting and watching sports on TV and beautiful fall colours....

The *things* we are thankful for are likely as diverse as we are as human beings.

But perhaps our story today teaches us to focus less on the *things* we are grateful for than on the *act* of being grateful itself.

To give thanks for something carries with it the assumption that there is someone to be grateful *to*. There are many people who have no interest in God who are, I suppose, generically thankful on this day. But I would submit that this is inconsistent.

You can be pleased at your luck, you can express a vague sense of pleasure at the stuff that you happen to enjoy, you can sort of participate in good feelings that come along with this time of year.

But to be truly *thankful* implies that there is someone to give thanks *to*. It's difficult to be thankful to the impersonal cosmos or to karma or to dumb luck. It's difficult to be thankful when you don't actually think that there is a Giver of gifts.

**The decision to *give thanks* is fundamentally a decision about God—about who God is, about how God loves, and about the proper order of things in our life.**

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A final word. It's easy to hear a story like this—perhaps even a sermon like this—and feel a heavy kind of guilt over our attitude to stuff, our inability to resist the temptation of idolatry, etc.

It is here that we need to revisit our other text. The writer to the Hebrews says this:

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.

Jesus is, of course, the true Word of God. And Jesus is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of our hearts.

He was able to do this in the story from Mark. He knew why the man was asking the questions he was asking, and what was currently standing in his way of living the life he was made for.

He knows the same for us.

He knows the desires of our heart. He knows if we want to be more grateful people. He knows if we want to worship more truly and honestly.

And he knows that it isn't always easy.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses...

The writer of Hebrews therefore encourages us not to come trembling before God in guilt and fear and grudging duty, but to,

approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

God is not some severe taskmaster hovering over us, inspecting our hearts and minds to make sure that we're being thankful enough, to demand that he is receiving the worship and allegiance he is due.

One of my deepest convictions is that none of God's commands are arbitrary, and that all are intended for *our* own good.

God wants us to live with open hands because it is better for us if we do so.

God wants us to locate our security and meaning and identity, not in things that are passing away, but in himself, the Eternal One who will one day welcome us home.

And God has not left us to flounder on our own, but has promised to help us become the people that we were created to become.

And all of God's commands, all the hard words of Christ, are rooted in *love*. Did you

notice that part in the story this morning? After this man says that he's kept all the commandments, after he's done his best to demonstrate to Jesus that he's been a good boy that's played by the rules, what does it say?

Jesus looked at him and loved him.

And he does the same for us. He looks at us and he loves us.

He loves us for the people we are and for the people we want to be. He loves us despite all of our failures and our mixed motives and misspent worship.

He looks at us. And he loves us. He loves us too much to leave us alone.

He knows that it might seem impossible to wean us from our lust after stuff, our chasing after idols that cannot save. But listen to what he says at the end.

"For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

All things are possible for God – even helping us to loose our grip on our possessions and to open our hands.

Even shaping us into people of gratitude and proper worship.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

