

What Love Sees
Hebrews 4:12-16
Mark 10:17-31

“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.’”

Not to put too fine a point on the matter, but the man in Mark’s 10th chapter strikes me as rude, arrogant and turned in on himself. Begging no one’s pardon, he runs to Jesus, interrupts him on the way to his death and then makes a show of flattering Jesus by kneeling at his feet and calling him “Good Teacher.” Why this grand entrance? Because the man has a question for Jesus, a question about himself: What must I do to inherit eternal life? It is all about him!

Jesus’ initial response suggests that he sees through the flattery. “Why do you call me good?” Jesus scolds. “No one is good but God alone.” Perhaps the man calls Jesus “good” because he thinks he, himself, is a pretty good judge of goodness. Yet Jesus’ response has a double meaning. The man calls him good because in Jesus, God has come to him. In Jesus, God is addressing him, no less than God is addressing us through this story. Yet having chosen, from the beginning, to know good and evil instead of God, he has come to this good teacher for confirmation that he is good enough to go to God.

Jesus meets him where he is by reminding him of the commandments that order human relationships under God’s rule. For one brief moment, I can only imagine the man is greatly relieved about the direction of this conversation, having kept every one of these commandments since he was a youth. When judged against the commandments, surely Jesus must see that he is already on the road to eternal life. A word of praise from Jesus and he can be on his way—on his own way.

I am still thinking “What an arrogant jerk!” But as it turns out, I am the jerk. Mark tells us that Jesus looked at the man and loved him. What have I missed? What did Jesus see? Given what Jesus says next, I am pretty sure that Jesus sees the human condition written all over this man’s lonely heart. Jesus sees the distance he keeps from God even as he keeps the commandments; sees the enormous energy he spends justifying the life he has chosen to live apart from God; sees the fear behind the man’s arrogance, his anxiety that God might see him for who he really is. In all these things, Jesus sees a man pursued by the one thing he cannot affect by his good behavior: Jesus sees a man pursued by death.

In a word, Jesus knows him from the inside-out because he has assumed the man’s human condition as his own. Jesus, himself, is also on the way to death. The significant difference is that Jesus is on the way to be death’s adversary rather than death’s victim. Therefore Jesus sees this man as precisely the person God has sent him to be with and for—not because the man is practiced in his piety; not because he has kept the commandments since his youth; but simply because he must die. Jesus is on the way to die for this man, so that, in life and in death, nothing (not even the man’s own rejection) can separate him from God’s love. Jesus looks at him and is determined to love him. But Jesus’ love for this man is about to be experienced by the man as judgment.

Let me stop here for a minute to say two things about God’s judgment. When the preacher of Hebrews says that God’s Word is sharper than any two-edged sword, able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart; when he says that before God no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render account,” I tremble, because I know the thoughts and intentions of my heart cannot measure up under God’s judgment; I know that the account I will have to give for my life at its end will be lame, to say the least. Therefore, since my youth, I have been trying to walk on the road that puts me in the right and puts people like this arrogant young man in the wrong. Compared to him, I reason, maybe I am not so bad. But you see, the significant comparison is not to the man, not even to the commandments, but to the man he has interrupted on the way to his death. In Jesus, I have to do not only with God’s goodness, but with what it is to be truly human. Compared to Jesus, if I keep the commandments at all, I keep them in the breach.

But in the next breath, this preacher of Hebrews says that the one who judges us is the one who knows us from inside-out, because he has assumed the life we live at a distance from God as his own: a high priest who is not unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Therefore we will finally stand before his throne of grace where we will be judged through the eyes of love, through eyes that see us better than we are, see us as creatures who have been destined in love for love. But therein lies the second thing to say about God’s judgment: we are all in the process of dying from the office of judge, Karl Barth says, an office we have taken on in order to occupy some morally higher ground than the neighbor, whom we, thereby, fail to love. “It is, therefore, a liberation that has come to pass in Jesus Christ,” Barth announces, “that we are deposed and dismissed from this office because [Jesus] has come to exercise it in our place.”

“You lack one thing,” our Judge says. One thing, the man thinks, I can do. One thing, Jesus knows, only God can do for him. When the man asked to inherit eternal life, Jesus heard him asking for a life with God, eternal life being another name for God. “You lack one thing,” Jesus says. “Go; sell; give; follow.” The effect of Jesus’ words, words that sound for all the world like Jesus’ judgment rather than his love, is that the man should become free for God and free for the neighbor.

He says personally to this man what he had said a few chapters before to a crowd in general: quit the life you have been living without God and receive a whole new life with God and for the neighbor. Follow me, which is, of course, the answer to the man's question; because, if it is God he lacks and unknowingly longs to be given, the God he lacks is looking at him in love.

Only in the last sentence do we discover something about the man's current life: he has many possessions, possessions from which he is not ready or willing to part. Jesus' command shocks him. He is not angry, not resentful, not even offended. I imagine him bowed down, bent over, his grief overtaking him. Still, he leaves Jesus changed, changed in the sense that he most now forever wrestle with the invitation he has refused.

I may be totally wrong, but I imagine most of us would say, no matter what we have—houses and families and vocations and money and health—that we sometimes have a sense that there is something missing in our life, something not quite right or true or good about the life we have been living, something more that wants us, the whole of us, something that has compelled us this morning to run to Jesus. "Where does discontent start?" John Steinbeck asks in *Sweet Thursday*. "You are fed, yet hunger gnaws you. You have been loved, but your yearning wanders into new fields. And to prod all these there's time, the bastard time. The end of life is now not so terribly far away—you can see it the way you see the finish line when you come into the stretch—and your mind says, 'Have I worked enough? Have I eaten enough? Have I loved enough?'" "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" you ask.

When Jesus sees us, I think this is what he sees. He sees precisely what we are trying to hide from the world and from ourselves by all of our well-doing and clean living. He sees us claimed by possessions and causes and projects and people in such a way that what we have, really has us, really owns us, really possesses us in ways that keep us from receiving the one thing we lack. God has made us for himself, Augustine famously said, and our hearts are restless until they rest in him.

Still thinking of the man as he walks away, Jesus now turns to look at the disciples. They are perplexed by what has just happened. Here was a man who had every material blessing and yet lacked the one needful thing. Listening to the encounter from their perspective, the disciples reasoned that they had done precisely what the man apparently could not do: they left everything to follow Jesus. Yet the encounter has shaken them, has caused them to question whether or not they are on the right road to eternal life, whether they are good enough. In her book on extreme altruists, Larissa MacFarquhar writes about people who are obsessed with "sacrificing little luxuries and adding up the lives they've saved. Then," she says, "they wonder if they should give up more things they don't need: cable television, having children, a new winter coat, that extra kidney they've been carrying around forever." According to MacFarquhar, each instance of extreme altruism ends the same way. With the "do-gooders" feeling strangely unsettled. "They've discovered that sacrificing for others doesn't make them feel as if they've earned a spot in heaven," she concludes. "All it does is see them through one more day."

Perplexed and astonished, the disciples realize that they are in the same situation as the rich man. Even though they have left everything and even though they are on the road with Jesus, life with God eludes them still. Peter's recitation of what they have left behind, what he has sacrificed for Jesus, suggests that who the disciples are, are the same men who once had all these things, men who are still looking back in order to judge themselves as in the right, rather than men wholly claimed by God. They know this because they are standing in the presence of the only man ever wholly claimed by God. He alone is our judge, who sees the thoughts and intentions of the human heart, sees us naked and laid bare, sees us as God sees us: through his perfect obedience that is his love.

What the rich man was not around to hear was the sentence on which each of our mortal lives turn eternally: "For mortals," Jesus says, "a life with God is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." The good news is this: the God who sees us through the eyes of love made flesh in Jesus Christ is not finished with the rich man, nor is God finished with you or even with me. You may walk away this morning, but you will walk away changed, as one who will forever wrestle with the invitation you are bound to refuse, until the day when love sees you and you see love face to face. Thanks be to God.