

God's Love Letter

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, October 11, 2009)

Mark 10:17-27 (TEV)¹⁷As Jesus was starting on his way again, a man ran up, knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to receive eternal life?"

¹⁸"Why do you call me good?" Jesus asked him. "No one is good except God alone. ¹⁹You know the commandments: 'Do not commit murder; do not commit adultery; do not steal; do not accuse anyone falsely; do not cheat; respect your father and your mother.'"

²⁰"Teacher," the man said, "ever since I was young, I have obeyed all these commandments."

²¹Jesus looked straight at him with love and said, "You need only one thing. Go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; then come and follow me." ²²When the man heard this, gloom spread over his face, and he went away sad, because he was very rich.

²³Jesus looked around at his disciples and said to them, "How hard it will be for rich people to enter the Kingdom of God!"

²⁴The disciples were shocked at these words, but Jesus went on to say, "My children, how hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God! ²⁵It is much harder for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle."

²⁶At this the disciples were completely amazed and asked one another, "Who, then, can be saved?"

²⁷Jesus looked straight at them and answered, "This is impossible for human beings but not for God; everything is possible for God."

So how are y'all today? Fine? No you're not. I know that some of you are carrying burdens of illness, some of you are recovering from surgery, and I can only begin to imagine how much pain you had to endure to just get out of bed this morning! And I know that some of you are struggling with strained relationships, some with family members, some with neighbors, or old friends, or maybe even somebody just in the next pew. I know you are not all fine – we just say that.

Now if you are squirming a little and wondering what in the world the preacher is trying to prove, maybe you can imagine, just a little, how that poor rich man felt when Jesus seemed to take him to task, just for calling him good. After all, if we could call any person good, wouldn't you say Jesus was good? What is happening here? Sometimes I wonder if the man called Jesus "good" as a way to get Jesus to say that he was good, you know, like a mutual admiration society. But Jesus wouldn't even accept being called good, let alone calling this man good.

One of the images from the Gospels that is very endearing to me is this image of the Rich Young Man. He tried so hard to obey all the commandments, from the time he was a youth. And then he came to Jesus, looking for reassurance. Jesus asked him to do the one thing he just couldn't do, the same thing that most of us can't do, he asked him to sell all his possessions and give the money away. The Rich Man goes away shocked, grieving. He just can't do what Jesus asks him to do. Then to hammer it home, Jesus says, **"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."**

Now if this doesn't make you squirm, you aren't paying attention. We are the rich people in the world. In this nation, we are so wealthy, that even those who earn minimum wage are among the top 5% of the wealthiest in the world. And Jesus says, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for us to enter the kingdom of God.

Maybe this is why Jesus questioned the man for calling him "good teacher." The man must have thought of himself as good – he had obeyed all the commandments. But he had flaws. For him, it was a love of his possessions. Maybe that comes close to home for us. We all have flaws – that may

be only one of the flaws in a long list, for each and every one of us. We may tell everybody we are just fine, but God not only knows our pains, God knows our shortcomings, our every mistake, all of our sins. If you are looking to earning your way into heaven, you are not going to make it. Remember the image that Jesus used – a camel going through the eye of a needle. That certainly is an overstatement, but then, apparently, so is our hope of earning our way into heaven. We can't do it. Even if we obey all the commandments.

But what I like about the story is that it doesn't stop there. There is another element – love. God's love. Jesus looked at the young man, Mark tells us, **loved him**, and then gave him that hard requirement. This was no ordinary love. This was not the kind of love that fades and vanishes under pressure. No, this is God's love, love that makes anything possible. When the disciples were shocked, Jesus said to them that with God, all things are possible. God can put a camel through the eye of a needle. God can bring the rich young ruler into the Kingdom of God. God can bring YOU into the kingdom of God. You cannot earn eternal life – you simply cannot do enough to earn your way into the Kingdom. You can obey all the commandments, every day from childhood, and even if you can respond to Jesus and sell all you own and give the money to the poor, you **still** cannot work your way into the Kingdom. But what you cannot do, God can. If you believe that, you will not go away sadly, as the rich young ruler did, but you will give every sincere effort to do all God wants you to do, as best as you can, not to earn your way into heaven or even appear as a good and righteous person, but just to show your love for God, and your trust in God.

But what is it that God want us to do? I do not think that God is asking us to dispose of all our possessions – not right now, not yet. But God does want us to worship him, to love him, and to receive God's grace. You can't do this by sitting in your home in a recliner, or even in the most peaceful setting in the woods. You receive God's grace by getting up, joining other Christians in worship and remembering the sacrifice of Jesus Christ by receiving his body and blood in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. It isn't too much to ask, especially compared to what God asked Abraham to do, or Noah, or Paul, and what Jesus asked the rich young ruler to do.

Oh, and there is one more thing. Love others. Reflect God's love to those around you – maybe even to those you don't like. God told Abraham he would make a great nation of him, he would bless him and make his name great, **so that you will be a blessing – in you, all the families of the earth will be blessed**. Last week I mentioned how the descendants of Abraham forgot this part. God didn't say that all the families, except the Amelekites would be blessed. God didn't say that all the families except the Egyptians or the Persians, or the French, or the Hispanics, or the people who live on Lee Street, or the people who sit on the left side of the church...God said that ALL the families of the earth

We Christians hear this again from our Lord Jesus, when he said to Nicodemus, **“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life**. Remember this: God loves you. God loves the whole world. God loves the world so much, that he gave his only Son. Can you believe this? Can you accept this? Can you accept God's love, not just by sitting in your chair and nodding your head, but by leaving your home and coming to God's house, to show that you accept God's grace? And then, can you reflect God's love? Can you love others, even those who disappoint you?

Maybe Mother Teresa said it best: I am a little pencil in the hand of a writing God, who is sending a love letter to the world. God loves the world and everyone in the world. Will you be a pencil in God's hand and write God's love letter to the world? Even if you are not “fine.” Even if you have aches and pains, or a burden of sin, or too many possessions, you can still be a disciple of Jesus Christ, and you can be a pencil in God's hand. Write a love letter today for God, and show your love for God, and for one another. Amen.