

21st Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 9.12.18
Scripture:

Mark 10:17-31

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"¹⁸ Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone."¹⁹ You know the commandments: "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."²⁰ He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth."²¹ 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."²² When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"²⁴ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!²⁵ 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."²⁶ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?"²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you."²⁹ Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news,³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life."³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

The chapel was beautiful, stone and hardwood and stained glass. The priest encouraged the young congregants gathered, "Let us praise God." It was a boys' school, a religious one, Church of England, I imagine. This was Monty Python, after all. "Oh Lord," the priest intoned, and the boys repeated, "Oh Lord."

"Ooooh, you are so big."

"Ooooh, you are so big."

"So absolutely huge."

"So absolutely huge."

"Gosh, we're all really impressed down here, I can tell you."

"Gosh, we're all really impressed down here, I can tell you."

"Forgive us, O Lord, for this dreadful toadying and barefaced flattery. But you are so strong and, well, just so super."

“You are so strong and, well, just so super.”

“Fantastic.”

“Fantastic.”

“Amen.”

“Amen.”

Do you think God might have been able to tell he was being flattered if they hadn't all just admitted it?

Jesus could tell. That's what I think, anyway. I mean, this man had run up to him—*run* up!—which is really not something a grown man is supposed to have done. It's said there was some social pressure not to run. That's what I seem to remember reading, anyway—that there was something indelicate about being grown and running in public in the Ancient Near East, maybe even shameful. But he ran, throwing caution aside—or putting on an interesting, obsequious show? And then he kneeled before him. “Good Teacher,” he said. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

It's an odd thing to ask for if you consider the larger context of this gospel, Mark, or either of the other two synoptic gospels for that matter, Matthew and Luke. The only time the topic of eternal life comes up in these three books is in the context of this story, with its small variations from book to book. Elsewhere, whenever that mysterious, spiritual realm is evoked—that realm other than the realm of this world—it's called the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven. Here, though, what this man wanted was to inherit “eternal life,” which I realize now puts a different spin on what's hoped for, don't you think? Continued being, escape from annihilation or non-being, eternal life focuses on the one hoping for such an on-going fate, focuses not at all on the otherwise fact that an essential quality of any eternity is that it is the realm of God. In short, this man seems very concerned with the ongoingness of himself and almost uninterested in eternal communion with God.

It's pretty egotistical, don't you think?

But is it too reductive a thing to suppose—that this man's cringiness stems from his utter mis-imagining what Jesus is all about?

Why have I never read that anywhere?

I mean, I get it. The notion that I might one day cease to be, the notion that all life as we know it might one day cease to be: this is the germ of all anxiety, an anxiety I have even been haunted by. The recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change puts me in mind of such anxious-making annihilation, so I get why this man might want to know for sure how and whether he would inherit eternal life. He didn't want to die. He didn't want to fade into non-existence. I get it. Instead, he wanted eternal life, ongoing existence. Okay. That's fine. It's just that it's off the mark of what Jesus is about, at least according to all the gospel accounts but John. Eternal life might be one quality of salvation amidst the Kingdom of God as per Jesus talked about a lot, but the focus of our hope, which Jesus named and stood for, shouldn't be just more life for me but also the filling and fulfilling presence and totality of God.

Given this (though subtle) selfishness on display, it might come as no surprise that Jesus had little give for this man—or so it seems. “You know the commandments,” he said, and he recited them—these which would have been entirely familiar to this man. (And so they were—for he's said to have said about them, “I have kept them all since my youth.”) “You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud...” But this is a funny inclusion, don't you think—because that's not actually in those Ten Commandments. “You shall not defraud.” That's not in there—and for this it sort of comes out of the blue.

Did the man recognize this sudden inclusion? Did he wonder about it? Did he wonder whether it was somehow aimed at him? Or was he being a little deceptive about his familiarity with those commandments? Did he perhaps not know that there was no prohibition about defrauding? Rumor was in junior high about a science teacher I had. He was known to be lazy and was thought not actually to read our lab reports, just to grade them on what he figured any of us would actually get. Rumor was a student once included a recipe in her report. It went unnoticed. She got a B or an C or whatever. (But, now *there's* the scientific method at work, test a theory by holding all things constant except one variable. She should have gotten an A now that I think about it.)

Whatever the man might have wondered, though, lots of others have wondered about it, that's for sure—about why Jesus added this prohibition of defrauding. There's speculation in scripture commentary that what Jesus was doing with this addition is testing the man as to whether his wealth was won by fraud. What's more, when the man insisted that he's kept all these

commandments from his youth, it's thought that his wealth was, apparently, honestly won. Jesus was testing him, and he passed, and this then retains the difficulty of this teaching—that this man has done nothing wrong and yet more would be asked of him.

See, it's not just about obeying the law. It's also, *moreover*, about relying on grace. Christians just *love* that lesson!

But, look, there's no mention of his wealth to this point in the story. Though it states later that he had many possessions, he doesn't appear to give obvious indication that this was the case. I mean, he ran up to Jesus—he *ran*, like some ruffian, or some sycophant.

Yes, a sycophant.

So, though not obvious, he does give perhaps *subtle* indication of his wealth and therefore high social status. That he approaches Jesus from a place of self-presumed power, though with this obsequious display of submission—kneeling before him, “Good Teacher”—he sounds like a sycophant, a flatterer, and that makes him a sort of fraud. And it's perhaps for this that Jesus included the commandment against defrauding.

That's got legs.

Ched Myers, in his excellent Markan commentary, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, notes of this man's address of Jesus, *didaskale agathe*, “Good Teacher,” that it's an honorific “very rare in Jewish literature,” and was “probably meant as flattery.” Quoting another scholar, Myers highlights of the man: “He tries to impress with a compliment and perhaps hopes to be greeted with a lofty title in return. In the Oriental world, one compliment requires a second.” But Jesus refuses to engage in the transaction set before him: “Why do you call me good? No one is good but the Father alone.

He's just not so transactional a guy.

Myers also notes: “Theologians have agonized over the Christological implications of Jesus' self-effacement here.” Like, what could he possibly have meant in claiming that he isn't good, that God alone is good? What could he possibly have meant in drawing so clear a differentiation between himself and God, making himself so utterly separate from the One with whom he's confessed to be One? Wasn't the whole point of Jesus that he was the presence of God manifest, uniquely filled with the Holy Spirit and thus having an immediate effect in the world—causing all evil to take flight, causing all unhealth to be worked out leaving the one unhealthy now healthy,

whole, perfect and complete, which is to say saved? So why would he say now that he's not good, that only God is good, which is to say there's a clear line between him and God?

Hmm.

Remember that time when *you* were so craftily flattered?

Has there ever been a time?

I recently was—flattered! My home was lovely. The story of my call to ministry was interesting. Our dogs are so well behaved. It all put me in mind of, “What do you *want*?” Turns out she wanted \$1500, a 1500% increase over my annual support of \$100.

No, we would stay with our usual annual support, good as the cause is. The whole thing just left me feeling so unlike myself.

Mr. Myers points out that all of the Christological hand-wringing is put to rest if we understand Jesus' response to this man as one of recognition that he was being flattered—flattery as something crucially different from praise. I mean, think of how others have approached Jesus along the way—with some measure of fear, with some measure of need and even desperation, or by proxy of someone they loved being in need (a daughter, in two cases), and in one case approaching him hoping not to be noticed, just to have the chance to touch the hem of his cloak...

“Good Teacher...” he said, having run up and now on his knees.

Flattery: it's not something I've given much thought to, to be honest. Turns out there's a lot to consider in this way of social discourse.

Like Plutarch: writing at around the same time as Mark (in the later part of the 1st century of the Common Era) and just across the Mediterranean Sea from Mark (who was himself in or around Galilee), Plutarch of what's now central Greece had a lot to say about flattery and flatterers, noticing among other things that flatterers use, as a form for their “glib and oily art,” mimesis—that is, mimicry. By mimicry (lately known to be the sincerest form of flattery, but more wisely understood as an insincere through and through), the flatterer enacts friendship without actually offering friendship. “...the flatterer,” he wrote “...adjusts and shapes himself, as though he were so much inert matter, endeavoring to adapt himself and mould himself to fit those whom he attacks through imitation.”

I know this about Plutarch's writing for having stumbled upon a recently published book, *Flattery and the History of Political Thought*, by political theorist Daniel Kapust. Subtitled with the

Shakespearean line, *That Glib and Oily Art*, from the Tragedy of King Lear, the book begins with an introduction (which is all I've read of it [so far]) in which Mr. Kapust posits that flattery is insincere, and that flatterers say things they don't mean but believe the one they're flattering believes about him or herself (what a lovely home I have, and well behaved dogs) and therefore the pathway for the flatterers' manipulation is the presumed self-love of the one flattered, the understanding that those flattered want the flatterer's lies to be true.

It's quite a thing, then, to imagine that this man perhaps thought of Jesus as someone whose self-image was grandiose, and that he needed to play to self-aggrandizing in order to get close to him.

Jesus, all about self-love and self-aggrandizement? The man really couldn't have been more wrong.

As for the enactment of friendship, distinct from actual friendship, Mr. Kapust notices this crucial distinction: the flatterer deprives the flattered of one essential benefit of friendship, that "of frank speech."

It's true, of course, as Mr. Kapust notes, that flattery can be a tool of the powerless in regard to those to whom they're subordinated—as a slave might flatter a master in order not to be whipped, or a child might flatter an abusive parent in order to be spared a beating, or a wife might flatter a husband who's shown himself to be petulant, paranoid, and vengeful. But flattery can also be a tool for those with some measure of power—to maintain their power among equals or to manipulate for gaining still more.

This is the significance of the admission, which the story makes about this man, that he had many possessions. This is to say that he, as a man with all the overt signs of status and favor, was used to being getting still more favor and yet greater status when he displayed such flattering submission.

And this is the reason for his shock and grief: that it didn't work this time.

Something did work for him though, for Jesus, it is said, loved him. Nowhere else do we see. Nowhere else is it said so plainly of something so direct, that Jesus loved.

This sycophant, this guilty rich guy, this presumptuous egotist, this obsequious power-monger: Jesus loved him. "You're trying too hard," I can even imagine him thinking—for all the

man needed to do to fall in with what he wanted was to get rid of all his possessions, to give it all away, and then he'd be taken up, and without all this transactional calculation.

But, no.

Same's true for a lot of people who have wealth in the world. The worry over the wealth, the fascination with it, the lust for it to grow; the dependence on it for legitimacy and respect and security and self-worth, burnishing your reputation; it as a means for a sort of eternal life (after all, didn't the man say, how can I *inherit* eternal life, so isn't this what great inheritance left to subsequent generations is largely about, one's transcendence over time and on-goingness of influence and power, and isn't this why the inheritance tax is felt to be threatening, offensive, though it is also very American?): it's all so boring. This sort of person is soooo boring. And sad. And transparent. And easy to pity and even love.

Okay. Now's the moment I come clean. I don't think anyone here needs this particular sermon. I don't think anyone here is all that affected by flattery, or all that much a user of flattery. There's really hardly enough power at play here in Southern Berkshire to make flattery a social ill that needs addressing or correcting. This really isn't a sermon to tackle a problem any of us really has.

But I read that comment, which made the off-the-cuff claim that this man seems to have been flattering Jesus, and it caught my interest. It also made me like Jesus a lot, a familiar feeling, of course, though now with new cause. In this exchange between two would-be powerful people, a rich man and the Messiah, Jesus kept his feet on the ground and his head clear regarding what he was about. Rather than rub elbows with someone at least more worthy and impressive than his doofus disciples, Jesus simply loved this man and then let him go as he decided he had to do. That moment—that exchange of unconscious need on the rich man's part, and of knowing and loving on Jesus' part: it was cinematic to me, and I wanted to spend time in that moment, that moment of obsequious display and plain truth.

And, you know, sometimes that's enough. Sometimes it's enough just to spend a little while with Jesus.

As it happens, preacher Will Willimon says this is ultimately the purpose of any preaching event: to allow for the risen Christ to walk among his people. And it's been a really hard few weeks, and we've had dumped on us some really heartbreaking news. And there was opportunity

to preach about any of it, or all of it, really. We could have heard from Job, who, so unjustly treated, proves himself no flatterer of God, though Job's friends would have him be. We could have heard from Amos, of whom it's said, if you like to book of Amos, you don't understand the book of Amos. Any of these would have tied in nicely with the unerving nature of our politics, or the cynical exercise of power among our politicians, or the devastating effect we're having on our environment, or the terrible and energizing imperative that to live as the gospel calls us to live will cost us each and all, cost us maybe even a lot. But I really just wanted us to spend some time with our savior, this uncomplicated man from Galilee. I really just wanted to have us spend time with an old friend.

Sometimes that's enough.

Thanks be to God.