

It's a great day to be at church! The word from Jesus today is, "You lack one thing..." Although, as Jarl put it, "...only one?"

As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man came up to him with a question. Just a man. Not a young man, as we hear in Matthew's version of this story. Not a certain ruler, as we hear in Luke's version of this story. Just a man. But maybe a man for whom things are going well. So well, in fact, that he has started to turn his attention to longer-term matters, to issues of ultimate concern. He asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus lists for him commandments, "you shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, or defraud; honor your mother and father."

We don't know if the man's response was humble or proud, anxious or satisfied, but he tells Jesus that he has, in fact, kept all those commandments since his youth.

At this point he was probably hoping for some affirmation from Jesus, maybe a gold star or a pat on the back.

But he doesn't get that.

Mark tells us next that Jesus looked at him and loved him, and then 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."

"You lack one thing..."

Did he know something particular about this young man? Here the words of our passage from Hebrews resonate. "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."

Did he know that this man had many possessions that he would be unable to give up?

Or does Jesus know something about people in general?

In 1995, in a fascinating project, sixteen of the world's foremost photographers traveled to thirty nations around the globe to live for a week with families that were statistically average for that nation. At the end of each visit, photographer and family collaborated on a remarkable portrait of the family members outside their home, surrounded by all of their possessions. While there is a tremendous amount going on in these pictures, I am going to move through them fairly quickly, just naming the country.

[slide show]

Bhutan	South Africa	India	Mexico
Cuba	Mongolia	Iceland	U.S.
Mali	Japan	Thailand	
Kuwait	China	Samoa	

This last family, the one from the U.S., was an average family in Pearland, Texas. A caption for the picture said that they were not actually able to get all their belongings into the picture. I am not sure how they would stack up against an average Ankeny family, but I noticed that they only had two garage stalls, and I know we have three. And we need three so we have room for our mower, snowblower, rototiller, weed wacker, extension cord, garden supplies, very dry kayaks, bikes, ladder, skis, folding chairs and garbage cans. I'm pretty sure we have more stuff in the third stall of our garage than the families from Mali and India have all together.

“You lack one thing...”

Did Jesus know something in particular about the man who approached him, or does Jesus know something about people in general?

It must be people in general, because he goes on to share that the likelihood of wealthy people entering the kingdom of God is comparable to a camel navigating the eye of a needle.

In other words, not gonna happen.

Which might cause us to ask why wealth would be *such* an obstacle to kingdom life.

Maybe it's because when we have wealth, and those things that money can buy, we are tempted to believe that we are self-sufficient, that we have and will continue to take care of ourselves, on our own. Which necessarily implies that we have no need for God. No place for God. No room for God in our lives.

As a corollary, it is also true that when we think we are self-sufficient, and that we can take care of ourselves, we have no need of others, we're distanced from that essential aspect of our human experience—relationship. We think all the relationships we think we need and that's good enough for us. But there are others who need us, and we need others, in ways we may not easily or often realize.

Maybe it's also because our resources, our money, our stuff can insulate us the daily concerns faced by those in the world who don't have what we have, but who are our brothers and sisters. We think we are ok, just fine, thank you very much. We are in our bubble of comfort. We lose sight of the fact that Jesus chooses to meet us most powerfully in those around us who are in the greatest need. The hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the sick, the naked, and the imprisoned.

“You lack one thing,” Jesus says to the man. “Go sell what you have, give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me. But shocked, the man went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”

The disciples are also shocked. The notion that wealth would be an impediment to the kingdom of God is stunning news to them. In that time, wealth was seen as a sure sign of God's favor, not an obstacle to God's kingdom.

They cry out, “Then who can be saved?”

But Jesus tells them that what is impossible for humans is possible for God.

When we face God's soul-and-spirit separating words, when we face the honest examination of a God whose knowledge of us lays us bare—including a knowledge that sees how tightly we grip our possessions and how very hard it is for us to let go of all that we think we have, the second part of our reading from Hebrews shows us God's steadfast response.

“Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

Our stubborn inclination to put our trust in anything and everything but God, including in our own possessions, draws us away from God—sends us away from following Jesus, even as we grieve our weakness. But God knows our weakness, and God has granted us the love of Jesus Christ, who makes all things possible, and who grants us the mercy and grace we need to let go of what it is we think we have—the ephemeral, transitory, meaningless stuff of this world, and to hold fast to that which we really have. God's love and care for us, which is both now and forever—a gift that returns hundredfold blessings. Letting go is not always easy, sometimes we experience persecutions, sometimes we are afraid, sometimes those around us are skeptical.

But it is such a far better, richer and more blessed way to live, opening our hearts more deeply to our neighbor, and more intentionally to God.