

October 10, 2021
“Saved from Impossibility”
Mark 10:17-31 / Amos 5:6-7, 10-15
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If you've ever seen the movie, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, you know there's a scene toward the end where the King Arthur and his knights have to cross the Bridge of Death – a mysterious and rather precarious-looking rope bridge hanging over the Gorge of Eternal Peril.

In order to cross the bridge and therefore reach the Holy Grail, they each have to answer three questions from the bridgekeeper. Failure to answer all three means being magically thrown into the gorge to your death. Hence the name.

Sir Lancelot the Brave volunteers to go first, ahead of the “Not-Quite-So-Brave-As-Sir-Lancelot” Sir Robin.

Question 1: What is your name?

My name is Sir Lancelot of Camelot.

What is your quest? To seek the Holy Grail.

What is your favorite color? Blue.

Right. Off you go.

Lancelot crosses, and seeing how easy the questions are, Sir Robin is quick to go next. His first two questions are the same, but the third is different: What is the capital of Assyria? Startled, Sir Robin admits he doesn't know and promptly gets thrown into the gorge, screaming.

Sir Galahad gets the same questions as Lancelot, but mistakenly copies Lancelot's answers and says his favorite color is blue. It's actually yellow. He tries to correct himself, but it's too late. Into the gorge.

King Arthur is last. Same first two questions, but as with Sir Robin, the third is different: "What is the airspeed velocity of an unladen swallow?" Arthur asks which kind of swallow, "African or European," and when the bridgekeeper can't answer, he gets thrown into the gorge. And the rest are able to cross the Bridge of Death. Classic Monty Python, if you're into that kind of humor.

From eternal peril to eternal life we go with today's gospel text. With questions – actually, just ONE, SINGLE question – not about AVOIDING eternal peril, but INHERITING eternal life.

An unidentified man runs up to Jesus, kneels before him, and asks him the existential question: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Not the Holy Grail and the myth of immortality, but a place in God's kin-dom to come.

Jesus responds with a question of his own, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." We'll come back to that in a bit.

He continues: "You know the commandments," and he proceeds to highlight a few – just a sampling of the 613 commandments found in Jewish law.

"Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Check, check, check. So far so good. And before Jesus gives the man an answer to his question, he looks at him. And he loves him. He looks at him, he SEES him, and he LOVES him.

We don't know anything yet about this man. In Matthew's account we find out he's young. In Luke's account, he's a ruler of some kind or another. We don't really know anything, but apparently Jesus already knows he's rich, which is why he looks at him and loves him before answering his question.

"You lack one thing." For a moment, just a moment, we could imagine the man feeling pretty good. Just one thing. How HARD could that be?

". . . go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor (the original Greek translation doesn't include "the money" – so it's just "give to the poor"), and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

Follow me to the kin-dom of God. Follow me to life eternal, which is to say, life that keeps on collectively even beyond our individual lives and inevitable deaths. Follow me to life abundant for all.

The man is shocked to hear Jesus's answer, and only then do WE find out why. Because he is indeed rich. Because he had many possessions, we're told. He goes away grieving, GRIEVING about what he stands to lose if he were to do as Jesus has instructed. Grieving.

Jesus's previous teaching echoes in the background: Those who LOSE their life for my sake, for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of love, for the sake of the kin-dom of God, for the sake of beloved community, will FIND it.

The rich young man grieves because he has a lot to lose. And perhaps, too, because he realizes that the eternal life he's clearly after may, in fact, be out of his reach. There may not be a place for him in God's kin-dom?

Jesus suggests as much in turning to the disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" Where the man was shocked, the disciples are perplexed. "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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."

In other words, it's not possible!

"Then who can be saved?" the disciples ask. Who, then, can ever enter the kin-dom of God? And you can hear in their question a growing feeling of despair. And you can hear that despair in Peter's pleading in behalf of his fellow disciples, as those who've already left everything to follow Jesus and his vision of a world made new. What's the point of all this? Can we even enter that kin-dom?

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

I've shared before at Calvary that my dad was fond of dropping words of wisdom for my sister and me when we were younger, what he liked to call "golden nuggets."

"Common sense is not so common."

"Only you can make yourself feel guilty."

And the one I've always most appreciated, and the one I now say to Gabe: "If you don't believe you can, you will always be right." If you don't believe it's possible, you will always be right.

That doesn't mean, of course, that whatever "it" is, is always possible. That whatever you believe you CAN do, you WILL do, but the point is well taken. And Jesus's point is well taken.

The rich young ruler came to him with a question about what he could do to inherit eternal life. To secure a place in God's kin-dom. To experience salvation.

Yes, Jesus's answer is about wealth. The kin-dom of God, as the rest of the biblical witness makes clear enough, has NOTHING to do with wealth. With money. With private property. With capitalism. With any system where there are rich and poor, and certainly not when there is such a staggering divide between the rich and the poor!

There are many people, past and present, who have taken Jesus at his word – vowing poverty and downward mobility to make their lives and their resources fully accessible to the community around them, in service to the common good. I do believe they are closer to the kin-dom, at least by this standard. Rich or not, selling everything you own to fully share your resources and your life with the poor is a radical move.

But Jesus's point is so much bigger than that. It WOULD BE impossible – it IS impossible – to save ourselves, IF we understand salvation as being about perfection, or being good or good enough. Remember, now, Jesus's assertion to the man that even he's not good.

It's not about being good, or good enough!

It WOULD be impossible to save ourselves IF we understand salvation to be some kind of reward to be earned, or target to be hit, or test to be passed, or riddle to be solved.

We operate, like the rich young ruler, as if there is something we need to do in order to be saved? In order to access God's kin-dom? But salvation already is. Salvation, none other than God's kin-dom of abundant love and life, is better understood as a gift to be opened. It comes, on earth as it is in heaven, whenever we open it, whenever we open ourselves to it.

Steve Garnaas-Holmes writes, "We think there are 'good' people (the man thought Jesus was one) and others who are less so. We believe our salvation is up to us. Clearly the disciples think so. Were that true, of course it would be impossible. But it's up to God. And God has already 'saved' us. . . . There is no requirement. God already loves us. We are already saved. There is no salvation beyond God's love . . ."

Jesus reminds us that we are saved from impossibility. Because for God, all things are possible. We are saved from the IMPOSSIBILITY of the world as it is becoming the world as God intends.

We are saved from the IMPOSSIBILITY of a world where everyone belongs, where everyone is free to be exactly who they are as God's beloved, made in God's image.

We are saved from the IMPOSSIBILITY of a world where everyone has what they need, where everyone has enough. Where everyone is safe.

We are saved from the IMPOSSIBILITY of a world where the earth is restored to its natural, life-giving, life-sustaining rhythms.

Entering the kin-dom of God is HARD – like a camel entering the eye of a needle, Jesus says – because it requires us to believe the unbelievable. To believe the impossible. And so to live out that belief, that hope, beyond whatever we might imagine is possible – not just for ourselves, but for all of creation.

To live and love beyond life as it is, to life as God intends for all of us. If you don't, my dad would say, you will always be right. But if you do, God only knows what is possible. Another way. A new world.

We open – and help keep open – the gift of that new world, life made ever new, whenever we're able to love more freely and fully – God, each other, ourselves. That's the lesson for the rich young man and for all of us.

Steve Garnaas-Holmes again: “The man seems to have great possessions but ‘lacks one thing.’ Jesus looks on him in his poverty and sets him free: let go of what you can measure and what you can lose—either riches or goodness—and grasp only what is infinite, what is already yours.”

We have to let go of and stop clinging to what is merely finite and temporary, and go deeper within ourselves to fully grasp what is infinite and eternal. What is truly and ultimately and sustainably life-giving for ourselves and, AND, for each other!

Questions about eternal life, of course, cannot ultimately be answered on an individual level. It is a shared reality. We are all in this together. That, I believe, is also Jesus's point.

In thinking through the lectionary texts for this week with me – including the Amos text with its appeal to “Seek good and not evil, so that you may live . . .” – Alisha shared a couple of really helpful insights into this work. Into the work to which Jesus invited the rich young man and invites all of us, regardless of what it is we might need to give up.

In light of working toward what she described so beautifully as both a “personal ecology of aliveness” and a “political ecology of justice,” Alisha shared a fable she has adapted for her Camp Sojourner staff handbook, called “The Wolves Within.” It goes like this:

An elder was explaining to a child about internal struggle. “My child, there is a battle between ‘two wolves’ inside all of us. One is love: justice, peace, joy, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith. The other is hate: greed, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, arrogance, self-pity, resentment,

inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego. Every day these two wolves battle inside us."

The child thought for a minute and then asked, "How do you know which wolf will win?"

The elder replied simply, "The one you feed."

The second insight, building on that story, is a quote from the Indigo Girls song, *Watershed* (and for those of you counting at home, that's now two Indigo Girls references in two weeks!):

"They say it's never too late but you know, you don't get any younger. You gotta learn how to starve the emptiness and feed the hunger."

Friends, we open ourselves and each other to the gift – the IMPOSSIBILITY – of God's kingdom, God's new world, life made new, abundant, eternal, WHENEVER we believe enough to starve the emptiness and feed the hunger. Whenever we believe enough to let go and so make space to love more freely and fully: God, the very source of love. God in each other. God in ourselves.

It's hard work, as Jesus reminds us. But it's not impossible, as Jesus also reassures us. With God's help, may we believe and live and love our way into divine possibilities.

May it be so.