

Mark 10:17-31 “First World Problems”

Whew. What a week. I’ve had better that’s for sure. So Wednesday ... I ordered a chocolate chai frost at Bidwell Perk. And I order this drink almost every week because on Wednesdays at 1:30 the local clergy meet to solve all the problems in the world. I’m usually the second person there and most of the time it’s the same barista working. So this week I ordered my usual: “I’ll have a Chocolate Chai Frost, blended, no whipped cream.” Now I don’t know whether the barista was having a bad day or whether Bidwell Perk is going downhill, but I was given this chunky, watered-down, flavorless mess that was just ... I don’t know ... off. It definitely wasn’t the quality that I usually get. And, you know, if I’m going to spend almost \$5.00 on a drink, the least they can do is get it right. But, you know – First world problems.

Then I was getting dressed this morning to come here, and I was looking in my sock drawer to find my favorite pair of grey socks that are just perfect for this time of year, but I couldn’t find them. I had a hamper full of clean clothes that I didn’t get around to folding last night, so I looked there and only found one sock. So the other one either didn’t find its way into the load I washed, or it disappeared into that black-hole of a dryer we have that transports socks into another dimension. So now I have to wear these other socks that are too thick and tend to sag a bit when I walk around. But, you know -- First world problems, right?

And I feel like I have to apologize for the sermon this week, or at least the quality of it. Because this week, my wireless keyboard wasn’t working very well, and sometimes when I’d type, there’d be a delay between the time I hit the key and the time a letter would show up on a screen. Sometimes I’d type three or four words and nothing would show up on the screen, then all of a sudden those words would just pop up on the screen and it just ... it threw my *rhythm* off. “Well why didn’t you just plug in a different keyboard?” you might ask. Well, you’ve got to understand *why* I got the wireless keyboard in the first place. See, the old keyboard just has these “mushy” feeling keys. I like a keyboard that

feels like the kind of typewriter I learned on back in high school. You know, something that actually feels like you've accomplished something when you hit the key. But the only one I could find that does that is this wireless keyboard that lags like crazy. So now you know why my sermon's going to be so bad this week. Again, I know – First world problems.

Now, here's where I'm supposed to turn the corner in my clever little narrative and remind you just how privileged *we* are. I'm supposed to say, "As members of the developed first world, we have shelter and clothing and running water and medical care and retirement plans and books and furniture and so many other perks and possessions." Then I'm supposed to take another surprise turn and say something like, "But the sad reality is, there are many people who *don't* have these things." Then I urge you to prayerfully consider how you could help others and share your privilege. Cue invitation hymn, turn it over to Kristina for moments for mission, Mary comes in for prayers of the people, Ken and Lisa do communion, then benediction coffee, cookies and whatever plans we have for Sunday afternoon. And this would be a reasonable and *predictable* thing for me to do.

But I'm not going to do that. Big surprise. Maybe it's because I'm not always a reasonable or predictable person. In fact, none of us here are reasonable or predictable people. We're disciples of Jesus after all. And during his time on earth, he was perceived by a lot of folks to be a most unreasonable man, who had an upside down view of the world. And to complicate things, it seemed to be his sole purpose in life to get as many people as he could to see the world the way he did. The scripture that Glenn just read is a prime example. A wealthy man came up to Jesus and asked him, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus looked at him then patiently and lovingly said, "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." Jesus wasn't being snarky. He was serious.

So, as you can imagine, the rich guy was shocked, and the gospel writer wrote, “He went away grieving.” Huh ... *grieving*. Maybe he went and sat in his big old house and sulked. Maybe he called his accountant and reviewed his assets. Or maybe he went and bought a jet-ski or a sports car to cheer himself up. The story really doesn’t say. It just says he went away grieving. Then Jesus turned to his disciples and said, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”

Notice what Jesus did *not* say. He did not say that the wealthy landowner was *privileged*. We hear that word a lot these days to describe rich folks. Jesus didn’t tell this rich guy to be grateful for his privilege, and to go find ways to help others so they can share in his privilege. Instead, Jesus told him to get rid of it all because only then would he be free to follow Jesus. That’s when the gospel writer tells us that the *disciples* were perplexed. They were probably thinking, “Wait. Why would he do that? Isn’t wealth and privilege a sign of *blessing*? That’s just sort of traditional wisdom, isn’t it? There are a lot of places in our Hebrew scriptures that make it pretty clear that the rich are ‘blessed.’ Why would you tell him that it would be difficult for him to enter the kingdom of God just because he’s rich?”

Well maybe this assumption that the rich are somehow blessed is not one of *God’s* assumptions. Maybe, just maybe, riches might even *prevent* us from experiencing the kingdom and culture of God. Because when we’re rich – and let’s be honest, most of us are comparatively rich – we tend to forget just how interconnected and dependent we all are on one another. Wealth sometimes *insulates* us from seeing and understanding that we need others to get through life. And when we go there, we often don’t see our need for God either. Wealth gives us the illusion of control over our lives, and of our futures. Wealth makes it impossible for us to learn to trust in God’s provision. Wealth can make us blind to the needs of others. Wealth blunts our compassion. If we don’t know and understand hunger, why would we give our sister bread? If we don’t know what it means to be cold, why would we give our brother a spare jacket from our closet? If we don’t know what it is to be

without shelter, why would we invite a stranger to come in and sleep in our space?

For most of us, these kinds of needs are beyond the realm of our experience. Our relative wealth insulates us. It makes us feel complacent, comfortable, and secure so that on the rare occasion that we can no longer ignore the needs of others, we refer them to government programs or other helping resources because we just don't know what to do. So then how *can* rich folks participate in the culture of God, which *demand*s that we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and love one another? And I'm not talking in some abstract and kindly social policy, but in real and material ways. Who among us can be saved?

To disciples asking this question, Jesus offers an answer: "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." And God's way is the church, because the church provides the arena where the Word of God and the people of God enter into spirited conversations. In listening to the Word, we are challenged to let go of the things which bind us, the things which give the illusion of security and control. In journeying with other people, we learn what it is to love and be loved. We begin to see just how impoverished we are: how mean, how shriveled up, how hard-hearted, how lonely we are ... even as we begin to recognize that it is in our poverty and our deepest need that God blesses us. More, we begin to feel the hunger of our brother or the loneliness of our sister, and we realize that we too can participate in God's work of healing. We too can enter into the culture of God and love one another in real and material ways.

Social isolation, lack of trust, deep spiritual hunger, a sense of meaninglessness, a failure to love and be loved, a failure to forgive and to accept forgiveness? Now, these might be "first world problems," but in Christ we've been given a new identity that dissolves the labels of "first developed world" and "undeveloped third-world." It invites us *all* to be poor. And in Christ's church, we don't have to grasp, hoard and compete to be rich, or to pretend we aren't rich. Those kinds of things

just consume us and turn us into liars. We don't have to guard and protect the possessions which so often possess us. In the church, we learn to seek our treasure in the "kingdom" work or "reign of heaven work" we do, instead. And in the church, we are shown the new reality, God's reality: a world that is pulsing with life and love; a community of beloved brothers and sisters; a culture where it is not the wealthy, but those who know their need of others, who are truly and deeply blessed.