

Aspirations for the “Good” Life

Mark 10:17-31

This has been an extraordinarily difficult week for those living in South Carolina where historic floods have ravaged the rivers and creeks from Greenville to Columbia to Charleston. It's hard to fully imagine these scenes unless, of course, we recall our own experiences a few years ago when Hurricane Sandy made a mess of southern New England and the Jersey shoreline and Irene left a path of horrific destruction in the valleys and villages of Vermont, particularly along Route 100 and the spine of the Green Mountains.

It's times like these when victims of nature's forces (e.g., floods, hurricanes, wildfires, tornadoes, mudslides, etc.) sense their greatest vulnerability as human beings. Why? Because their entire households and livelihoods can be virtually wiped out in but a moment's time and there's nothing they can do about it. It's gone. What once was their life is now lost forever.

Nature, unlike society, is a great equalizer; it doesn't distinguish between the good and the bad, between races or religions, or the rich from the poor. There were scenes this week of flood victims from all walks of life and income levels standing in line together to receive potable water and supplies. As often happens, desperate people were brought together by their common losses and needs and their essential humanity, regardless of their previous state in life. When someone is left with little to call their own, when so much of what was valued has vanished, it makes no difference whether they had a lot or a little, for their predicament is similar and the measure of what's good about their individual lives changes in a heartbeat.

As we often see, when suffering loss, people come to terms with it by appreciating what they still have, i.e., life itself, the lives of others, and the opportunity to recover. In a time of need, the basics seem undeniably important. But all of this stands in stark contrast to normality and what people would consider a good life. They can't help but grieve the loss of what they had in life—their people, their places, their pets, their perks and pleasures which make life truly enjoyable.

However it gets described, living a good life only to then lose it seems like a terribly harsh penalty to suffer. It's more like taking on the mantle of Job: certainly, one can be grateful for what one still has, but it's hard not to feel miserable over what was lost. Any memory of what once was seems cruel when you have no choice but to start over with a whole new set of reference points.

Yet, as disheartening and upsetting as this might be, life often teaches us with every crisis comes an opportunity. For some, a catastrophe could well be a blessing in disguise. Why? Starting over isn't always such a terrible fate. Think about it. How often do people wish they could have a reboot on their life—a chance to do it over based not on what was once thought as important at an earlier time, but on what they now see is essential for experiencing a good life?

Or let me put it this way: How many of us have piled up our lives with material clutter and “valuable” possessions that eventually seem cumbersome and unnecessary? Or how many people do we know who have pursued career goals or certain lifestyles or standards of living at a cost to their relationships or their reputation? In their regret, they wish they could have a do-over. They've become enslaved

by their possessions, responsibilities, jobs, or aspirations and don't know how to change.

At some point along the way of pursuing our life's aspirations and striving for the rewards of the good life, it's not uncommon to wonder, is it worth it? If I could start over again, would I do things in the same way? Could I have been a better person—a better spouse, a better parent, a better colleague, a better boss, a better employee, a better neighbor, a better friend, a better steward of my resources, a better Christian?

Along the way, it's beneficial to ask ourselves, what does make for a good life? What do I aspire to? What does it mean to be a good person? What would any of us do if we could have a reboot on our lives—even if it came in a cataclysmic way—in order for us to reinvent ourselves with aspirations for a truly good life? That's not to invite disaster, but sometimes it takes a crisis to wake us up and help us realize that our "good life" isn't always so good after all—good for us or good for someone else.

In many ways, I sense this is thrust behind Jesus' commentary in this story from Mark's gospel, i.e., how is "the good life" really defined? What makes a person "good"?

This story might be familiar insofar as it contains the perplexing comment which chastens the aspirations of most ambitious people: "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 my experience, the only ones who don't flinch at the meaning of this verse are those who have little to lose or those who don't really care about the kingdom of God. Despite many efforts over the centuries to soften its

meaning, the intent is precisely in what it says: there is something associated with being rich (or the pursuit therein) that prevents a person from being in harmony with the character of the kingdom of God and Christ's beloved community. That's a big claim to make, particularly in our context where God and Mammon are thought to be best buddies. At the very least in the context of Jesus' encounter with this man, we have to find out why they are not.

Let me be as precise as I can be. Affluence, in itself, is not the great evil; many good things are made possible through charitable donations from very wealthy people. Honestly, this has more to do with how wealth is attained and what the ambition for riches does to the human heart and conscience. In Jesus' day, affluence was considered a sign of divine blessing; the corollary being, poverty was supposed to be a telltale sign of divine judgment. But, as we know, Jesus had a different view.

That's really the set up for this story where Jesus encounters a man of means who has, in his own estimation, lived a good life—one worthy of public admiration, God's blessings, and eternal life. He seemed to seek confirmation of that self-assessment as he approached Jesus, initiating the conversation by referring to him as "good teacher"—an unusual and rare salutation in ancient Jewish circles. Since the custom at the time was for polite people to greet each other in a mutually-respectful manner, this man expected a similar compliment in turn from Jesus. Except, as we see, he received none.

Instead, what came in return was a question: "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." That is a fair response, but socially awkward. Is anyone truly "good" in life, and if so, what does

that mean? Who are they “good” for—themselves or for others? Who is the beneficiary of this apparent goodness? As Jesus perceived, things are not always what they appear to be.

So why did this man call Jesus good? Did he need Jesus to return the compliment to publicly confirm this man in his “goodness”? Was the man not confident of his own standing before God or his peers? Was he arrogant or insecure, or both?

To flush this out a bit more, Jesus then recited six of the ten great commandments—not the ones the pious tend to cite (to validate how devout they are in honoring and revering God and the Sabbath). Instead, Jesus recited all the ones that had to do with social morality and how one treats his/her neighbor—“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 mother and father...”. Proudly, yet foolishly, the man nods his head in agreement and reports, from the day of his Bar Mitzvah, he’s got a clean bill on this moral checkup, As far as he was concerned, his good life confirmed he was a good man.

What’s interesting here, though, is when Jesus threw a little curve at him. Jesus made reference to something that wasn’t specifically a part of the Ten Commandments, but was certainly one of the great problems of his society. Namely, instead of reciting the commandment “you shall not covet,” Jesus made things a bit more pointed: “you shall not defraud.” Why was this significant? Because to acquire wealth routinely involved some form of fraudulent business practice (not merely unethical, but unjust)—usually, the rich

unfairly taking advantage of those with less. How did this happen? In a number of ways.

Zacchaeus, for instance, made his good life defrauding people by charging exorbitant fees whenever he collected people's taxes. That's one kind of fraud that made rich people rich. More typical were the landowners, who lent subsistence farmers money like loan-sharks, placing liens on their small plots of land and profiting off the steep interest and the eventual foreclosure. Sound familiar?

That's how the rich got richer and the poor got poorer—the lending business wasn't designed for charity; it was intended to defraud people out of what few assets they had in order for the elite to control more of the land and its natural resources! It didn't require divine insight for Jesus to figure out how this man acquired his wealth; like so many others, he cheated those he was morally obligated to help at no cost, at least according to Leviticus and Deuteronomy! Apparently, that was one part of the Torah this “good” and “pious” man overlooked!

Yet, rather than pull out a scroll to read Leviticus 25, Jesus drove home the point directly without mincing words: “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor...” –in other words, give up his “good life” and make restitution to the very ones he defrauded. In that awkward moment, this proud man of means was exposed for who he truly was and not how he presented himself to be. His reaction of surprise and sadness was not unexpected; instead of proving his worthiness and affirming his good life, it only brought humiliating shame for the pious fraud he was.

One might deduce, then, that the point of this story was simply to shame and humiliate the rich, or to judge them as unworthy of divine mercy with Jesus' extraordinary claim that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. But we're overlooking one more detail that's important in the telling of this story. Before Jesus challenged the man to sell his possessions, it's prefaced by: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him..."

This detail is often overlooked, but it expresses Jesus' true motivation. Rather than indicting and condemning the man for his hypocrisy and injustice, Jesus' intent was to *deliver him from his sin*—to liberate him from his so-called "good life" where, among many things, it was built upon the misfortune of others, as well as his callous willingness to treat people as objects to be manipulated. Jesus sought to save him from himself and a life that had benefited him with great wealth, but at the cost of hardening his heart toward the plight of those who suffered. One even wonders if he was driven into religious piety to atone for his deeper, subconscious guilt and restlessness before God. Perhaps, that was why he had no real assurance of his own eternal standing and required outside confirmation from Jesus of his goodness which, of course, was not forthcoming. He wasn't that good.

However, what Jesus did offer was his only way out, i.e., to dispossess himself of all that possessed his soul—his unjust material wealth and the insecurities and social isolation that came with it, not to mention the self-serving, self-validating piety that masked it. Jesus' intent was out of love and compassion to save the tormented

soul of a man who deluded himself that he was truly good when he wasn't.

To be honest, no one knows how this story ended for this particular man, or how it ends for everyone who is just like him—perhaps even some we know. Maybe we're convinced that the pursuit of wealth has no moral consequences—that one person's gain never equates to another person's loss, or that unfettered ambition for “the good life” is perfectly justifiable. Wall Street and corporate America won't tell you otherwise. Profit is everything. Money is the only means to a good life.

But somewhere in the recesses of our collective conscience, we know people suffer for that reason. We know there are business practices that harm far too many and we know, if we are part of that world, we should feel haunted by the fact that somewhere in our life there are grievances against us that are unaccounted for and likely beg for some form of restitution. Hence, there's likely to be spiritual discomfort and restlessness that won't go away.

Had this rich man followed Jesus' guidance; if he, like Zacchaeus, had sought to repair the damage he had done to others, to restore what he had defrauded from those who were desperate; if he, and others like him, were to stop this economic and social abuse of people, then the Kingdom of God—the reality of God's presence—would, in fact, become more evident in his world in the generous prosperity shared by all. If the rich man had done what Jesus asked him to do, the camel just might have found its way through the eye of the needle after all.

Honestly, a transformation such as this usually doesn't happen voluntarily—typically, it comes about through a crisis of some sort that forces people to their knees to count their blessings among great losses. Sometimes, they never realize how burdened they have become by the stress and demands of their ambition, possessions, and privileges and “good life” until they have lost everything—every status symbol, every source of self-pride, every memory of their perceived goodness, until they, like Job, want to curse God and die.

That's the grueling moment of truth when a person realizes the only thing they can truly value in life are the essentials that aren't determined by wealth and status, i.e., the people they love and those who love and care for them. By these standards, a person can be dirt poor and yet more proud of what they have in life than those who seem to have it all. If this community of love is broad enough then, though dispossessed of all the stuff that gets in the way of honest, trustworthy, and meaningful relationships, people experience the richness of spirit and a lightness of being—the joy of a truly good life.

Frankly, such a crisis of truth may happen for some fortunate ones in South Carolina over the coming months, who come to realize they have a rare opportunity to reboot their lives and start over again, perhaps impressed by the goodwill they have received and experienced in their time of trouble. Their loss may well bring about greater gain. If so, through this terrible time, they just might realize where the Spirit of God has been all along: right there beside them through the storms and the sorrow and the recovery, giving to each of them another opportunity to aspire to a truly good life.

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