

“Only Traveling Through”
Mark 10:17-31
Sunday, October 11, 2015
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

An American tourist was in Jerusalem, where he encountered a monk who was giving a tour of a monastery. The monk had no T. V. or radio, only one change of clothes, a towel and one blanket.

The tourist was amazed and intrigued. He couldn't imagine life with so few amenities. He asked, “Why do you live so simply?”

The monk answered with a question, “Well, I note that you only carry enough things to fill a suitcase. Why do you live so simply?”

“Oh, but I'm just a tourist. I'm only traveling through.”

“So am I,” said the monk.

I. Travel light.

This is the point of today's gospel, isn't it? We're only traveling through.

Mark begins by telling us that Jesus is going somewhere; he is “setting out on a journey” (v. 17). But where is he going? Later in chapter 10 Mark clarifies; Jesus is “going up to Jerusalem” (v. 32). Although not all of Mark's first century hearers know this, you and I understand that the cross awaits him there.

In Mark, the “going to Jerusalem” stories include two elements: 1) a very difficult, challenging demand from Jesus, and 2) a very confused, bewildered group of disciples.

And so it is with this passage. The rich man kneels at Jesus' feet and asks him a very big question: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (v. 17). Jesus answers in three

parts.

First, he corrects the man by reminding him that no one is good but God alone. God created the world and gave us everything we have and made us all that we are. No one is good but God alone (v. 18).

Next, Jesus reminds the man of those commandments that address human relationships: Do not kill, do not steal, do not commit adultery, do not bear false witness, honor your father and mother – and a new one related to stealing, “do not defraud” (v. 19). These commandments are central to the man’s religious upbringing. Jesus reminds him of his Jewish faith.

The man eagerly and solemnly replies, “Teacher,” – he’s a quick learner; he has dropped the “good” in reference to Jesus the Teacher this time around – “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth” (v. 20).

Then Jesus says, “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” (v. 21).

To summarize Jesus’ instructions:

- 1) Get rid of your past – sell everything that might tie you to your former life.
- 2) If you do this, you will have eternal life or treasure in heaven, in the future.
- 3) And as for the present – “Come, follow me!”

Jesus invites the man into discipleship. He doesn’t praise poverty and condemn wealth; he simply invites the rich man to the joy of following Christ. Jesus sees the rich man and loves him, because Jesus knows that a person must be unencumbered in order to follow Him. We must travel light, like the monk, because we are only traveling through.

II. Kingdom abundance.

There’s a story that forms an interesting parallel to the story of Jesus and the rich man.

It's about an abbot who is so impressed with a follower's spiritual progress that he allows this young disciple to live in a lean-to on the riverbank.

Each night the disciple, happy as a lark, washes his loincloth and hangs it out to dry.

One morning, however, he finds the loincloth torn to shreds by rats.

So he gets a kitten. But now he must beg not only for food for himself but also milk for his kitten. So he gets a cow. But there is the trouble of food for the cow. So he decides to work the land around his hut. But then he has no leisure to meditate. So he hires workers.

Checking up on them is too much work. So he marries a wife to do the job (because why else would you get married?!). Pretty soon he is one of the wealthiest men in town.

A few years later, the abbot returns to find a mansion where the lean-to used to be. He cries in dismay, "What is the meaning of this?" The embarrassed disciple replies, "Holy Abbot, there was no other way to keep my loincloth!"

Now this story is a parable. It is not a prescription for life. Not everyone is supposed to live in a lean-to by a river. Not everyone is meant to get by with minimal belongings.

Jesus knows the power of possessions to lure us away from the joy of God's kingdom. Jesus knows how the protection of a loincloth can become an amassed fortune. And he knows how desire for more wealth or desire for more security can divert us from the good life that God intends for us.

The gospel reading continues with teachings about wealth. The disciples are amazed and astonished as Jesus tells them – not once, but twice – that it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. He makes the point twice because it's so unheard of. The society of Jesus' day believed that wealth was a sign of God's favor. On judgment day, they believed, the rich would be welcomed into eternal life, and the joys of God's kingdom, while the poor would be

excluded.

So what Jesus is saying is radical stuff. The rich may have a hard time getting in. As a matter of fact, a camel would have an easier time getting through the eye of a needle than a rich person will have getting into the kingdom of God.

Unbelievable! Impossible to be saved, say the disciples (v. 26).

But Jesus reassures them. Impossible things are possible with God. And being reminded by Peter that the disciples have left everything to follow him, Jesus says they will be rewarded with the abundance of the kingdom, in this life and in the next (vv. 29-30).

Finally, Jesus closes by saying that many who are first – or “rich” – will be last – or “poor.” And many who are last, will be first; the poor will be rich (v. 31). The kingdom of God is very different from what we might expect.

There was a man who loved gold. Then he inherited a fortune. With joy he redecorated his bedroom. He put gold parchment wallpaper up, hung yellow curtains, had a golden colored rug and a yellow bedspread. He even bought some yellow pajamas. But then he got sick and came down with, of all things, yellow jaundice. His wife called the doctor who made a house call and went up to that bedroom for an examination. The doctor stayed up there a long while. When he came down, the wife asked, “How is he?”

“Don't know,” said the doctor. “I couldn't find him.” (Adrian Rogers)

Many people in our society are lost in a world of greed and materialism.

Closing.

Of course there are questions. Should we all go out and sell everything and give to the poor – and live in lean-to's by the riverbank? No. But we should all be aware that we are only traveling through this world. We should travel as light as we can.

Remember – if we choose to follow Jesus, God will make discipleship possible for us. God will help us to do what we are unable to do through our own power – let go of our attachments to our possessions and our positions and our image in society.

There's a bumper sticker that says, "The one who dies with the most toys wins."

But you and I know that we can't take our toys with us. The Jerusalem tourist might well heed Jim Mullen's travel tip: "If you want to get away from it all, don't take it all with you."

Remember – we are only traveling through this life. If you want to get away from the pain, the alienation, the sin, the loneliness, the hurt of your life – leave your attachments behind. Set your eyes on Jesus and follow Him. You will have joy 100-times greater than what you now know.

Amen.