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[Sermon: “What Do You Need to Let Go?"](http://franklinfederated.org/worships/2021/10/12/sermon-what-do-you-need-to-let-go)

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**Scripture Reading:**  **Mark 10:17-31 (New Revised Standard Version)**

**17**As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” **18**Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. **19**You know the commandments: ‘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 father and mother.’” **20**He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” **21**Jesus, looking at him, loved him and 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.” **22**When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

**23**Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” **24**And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! **25**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.” **26**They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” **27**Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

**28**Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” **29**Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, **30**who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. **31**But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

“What Do You Need to Let Go?"

The desire for immortality seems to have been around forever.  In the Middle Ages, knights of the king’s court searched for the Holy Grail, believing that one sip from this legendary cup would allow them to live forever.  A few hundred years later, explorers in the new world sought the fountain of youth.  These days, some people pay thousands of dollars to have their bodies cryogenically frozen—with the hope that sometime in the future, when science advances, they’ll be able to wake up and resume their lives.

The desire for immortality was present in Jesus’ day as well.  The rich man in today’s scripture reading was looking for it—it’s clear from his question, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus, however, gives him an answer he doesn’t expect.  The Scripture tells us that “Jesus looks at him and loves him.”  In other words, rather than getting angry at the man’s ignorance or privilege, Jesus answers with compassion and says, “You lack one thing; go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”  The rich man is shocked by Jesus’ words and goes away grieving.

I remember being a kid reading this Scripture, and I didn’t understand the man’s reaction.  At the time, the choice seemed easy to me.  I mean, compared to immortality, how good could his possessions be?  Silk, gold, diamonds, shoes—sure, they’re nice, but you can’t take them with you!  Why couldn’t he see that?  Why couldn’t he let go?

As an adult, my understanding of what Jesus was asking the man to do has grown, and I have a greater appreciation for how difficult the choice actually was.  It’s become clear to me that the possessions ***themselves*** probably weren’t the main roadblock for this man—my guess is that it’s what went **with** them:  power, prestige, influence, the ability to make choices.  Or maybe it went even deeper than that:  maybe what the man had trouble letting go of was **his identity.**  No doubt, his wealth bought him a nice position in society.  People recognized him, looked up to him, admired him.  Without all that, what would his life be about? How would he **define** himself?  ***Who*** would he be?

When *who you are* is too closely defined by *what you have*— then to give up your possessions means to give up **yourself**—and the man in our reading wasn’t able to do that--at least not yet.

And his lack of ability to do what Jesus asked implies that there was something else that the man lacked too.  His understanding of eternal life was apparently not the same as what Jesus understood it to be.  For the man, eternal life evidently meant being immortal, living forever in the same identity and lifestyle to which he’d become accustomed.  But, for Jesus, eternal life was defined differently.

For Jesus, eternal life was first and foremost entering into the community of faith, the family of God.  It was claiming a new identity:  your identity as a child of God, a child who is as equally loved, accepted, valued, and forgiven as all of God’s children.

This is what Jesus was getting at when he commanded the man to sell his possessions and give to the poor.  Jesus was trying to get the man to claim a **new identity** and, with it, **new priorities.**  Jesus was encouraging the man to see himself **first and foremost** as a child of God— a child who is called to be **part of a community** where **growing and sharing equally in** love, acceptance, and forgiveness are valued above wealth, power, prestige and influence.

My friends, like this man, we are each called by Jesus to claim our identity as children of God, as part of the community of faith.  To fully claim this identity, **there may be things in our lives that we need to let go.**  Like the man in the reading, maybe we have allowed **other** things to define us **more** than our relationship with God---  maybe we have found our **primary** identity in our work or our status or family relationships.  Not that these things are bad in and of themselves, but the problem with letting these things define us **more** than our relationship with God is that **these** things are *not* eternal.  Jobs end.   Status can easily change.  Family configurations shift.  And when these changes happen, if our identity is not centered in God, we are cast adrift.  Let me give you an example.

Ed and Kathy—not their real names—have been friends of my husband for years.  When they were newly married, they moved from the Midwest to the Gold Coast of Connecticut, got good jobs in the corporate world, and started to climb the ladder of success.  He was an executive in a corporation, and she worked for a real estate company.  When they had saved enough money, they started a family—had 3 children in fairly short order.   While the children were young, Kathy cut her work schedule to part-time so she could be home with the kids at least some of the time.  But the two of them—and their children—had such busy schedules, that the whole family rarely, if ever, got together as a unit.  Ed and Kathy themselves were like ships passing in the night and started to feel burned out—like they were drifting away from each other and themselves-- losing their identity as a couple and as individuals.

(Something that happens fairly often in our world today.)

At the time, Ed and Kathy were not religious--they hadn’t been to church since they were young, but they started seeking something beyond themselves to bring life to their souls.   They even prayed about it, though they weren’t even sure there was a God who was listening.  Well, as a short-term solution, they decided to take a family vacation together, and ended up in Vermont—and, by divine providence, stumbled upon the Westin Priory.  Some of you may be familiar with it, but, if not, the Westin Priory is where a group of Catholic Benedictine monks live and work and lead worship services open to the public in an old stone chapel, where they play guitars and drums.  Ed and Kathy found these worship services so healing that they decided that they needed to reconnect with God and participate in a church community like this on a regular basis.

To make a long story short, they decided to change their life-style so that everything they did reflected their **renewed understanding of who and what God was calling them to be.**  So, they left Connecticut, bought an Inn in Vermont near the Priory, and started what they considered to be a ministry of hospitality—reasonably priced accommodations where burned-out city dwellers could come to find renewal.  Their children lived with them there in the Inn, and although Ed and Kathy have now retired, two of their children have continued the ministry of hospitality there at the family Inn in Vermont.

Now, I’m not saying that we all need to move to Vermont and start a ministry.  What I am saying is that if we each allow our primary identity to be “a child of God,” we can stay centered and make a positive difference in the world no matter what happens to us.  If our primary identity is being a child of God, we will have a community of faith that offers mutual support and care and helps us grow through good and bad times alike.   When we are grounded in this identity, that’s when we discover **the true meaning of eternal life,** which is not simply immortality for an individual, but rather being part of something larger than ourselves.  It’s being part of the Kingdom of God, which many people these days call the “kin-dom of God,” to emphasize that it’s all about *relationships,* that is, sharing equally with others in the love, acceptance, and forgiveness of God—now and always.

I think many of us have come to appreciate the importance of this kin-dom--being part of a community of faith-- even more during this pandemic, haven’t we?  I’ve talked with a number of people who have expressed how church connections--virtual and in-person--have been a lifeline for them in this time of Covid.  And how the stress and grief of Covid, as awful as it has been, has also forced us to re-think some of our priorities.

So, my friends, may we each take some time this long weekend--and beyond--to re-examine our own priorities--to prayerfully ask ourselves the question, “Is there anything I need to let go of in order to make my relationship with God-- and others in God’s kin-dom-- top priority?”  And, by the grace of God, may we continue to grow together in Christ, sharing more **equally in** love, acceptance, and forgiveness with all God’s people.

Let us pray.

O God, you have called us into your kin-dom, and we have answered that call by being part of this family of faith.  O God, continue to challenge and teach us through your Scriptures, through your good gifts of reason and reflection and science, through our interactions with others, that we may grow in faith and understanding.  Help us to see and treat all people as equals, working for justice in ways that build each other up and not tear each other down.  May your all-encompassing love help us to let go of whatever gets in the way of our making you and your kin-dom our top priority.

And hear us now as we lift up to you our prayers for our community and our world.

Bless the Afghan refugees as they resettle in new countries, including the family that is now settling in Worcester.  Help our fellow citizens welcome these newcomers with open arms and value them as brothers and sisters in God’s all-encompassing family.

Bless all of the participants and spectators taking part in the marathon tomorrow.  Keep them safe, O God, and may this event be filled with joy.

PHONE

SLIPS OF PAPER.

- Moment of silence…lifting up in prayer those we hold in our hearts.. others in this room and in our livestream…  [PAUSE]

- O God, bless the sick… those who are struggling… those who are grieving…caregivers… Give them strength and healing….  In Jesus name, Amen

PLEASE JOIN ME IN THE LORD’S PRAYER

- Our Father, who art in heaven
Hallowed be Thy Name
Thy kingdom come
Thy will be done on earth
as it is in heaven
- Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our debts
As we forgive our debtors`
- And lead us not into temptation
But deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.  AMEN

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[An earlier version of this sermon was written by Marlayna and preached on 10/15/06.]