

Sermon: “What’s Mine Is Yours”*
Hebrews 4: 12–16; Mark 10: 17–31

St. James Presbyterian Church, October 10, 2021

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This beautiful time of year, this time of glowing days and cool evenings, of golden fields, apples lit red on sun-kissed trees, squash and pumpkins and corn on display, is the favourite time of year for many of us. “Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,” the English poet John Keats called it, in his poem, “To Autumn.” As autumn approaches, he says, it “conspires” with the sun “how to load and bless” the vines with fruit, how to bend the trees with apples, how to fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For Summer has o’er-brimm’d their clammy cells.

Even in our own, non-poetic world, the grocery store produce shelves are piled high with fruit filled with “ripeness to the core,” not to mention tomatoes, cucumbers, carrots, and squash. It’s said that at this time of year, it’s especially risky to leave our cars unlocked and unattended. We may come back from wherever we’ve been, a shop, Tim Horton’s, or even church, to find the back seat filled with zucchini. I do hope that you locked your car doors today.

There’s a reason that people who grow zucchinis end up with too much zucchini. They underestimate just how productive one zucchini plant can be. Because they can’t quite trust that one zucchini plant will be enough, at planting time, they buy a pack of six zucchini plants. At harvest time, then, they end up with six times more zucchini than they can reasonably steam, sauté, bake, pickle, or transform into zucchini bread. They have been blessed far beyond their imaginings, and they respond by sharing the blessing that they have received with unsuspecting and somewhat incautious motorists. Or so the story goes.

Selfish people are known by the mantra, “What’s mine is mine, and what’s yours is mine.” For zucchini growers, the mantra might be, “What’s mine may

* This sermon text is provided as a help to listeners with hearing or language difficulties, as well as others who are interested. It is not intended as a fully-documented publication — and it may differ from the sermon as preached.

be mine, but what's mine is yours too!" Since they can never repay the blessing's source — the seed, the earth, the power of growth in all things, the good God who provides all good things — they pass the blessing along. They pay it forward.

The mantra "What's mine is mine" seems to be behind this morning's story from the Gospel of Mark. In the immediately preceding passage, Jesus has welcomed the children his disciples were trying to turn away. "Let the little children come to me," he told them; "do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." A little child comes into the world with nothing. That child is completely dependent on those around him, or her, to provide the nourishment, shelter, and care that sustain life. Jesus also welcomes the man who runs up to him in this morning's reading, but this man is not like a little child. He has many possessions. When asked to choose between the kingdom of God and his worldly good, he chooses his possessions.

Our troubling reading unfolds in three conversations that force us to consider, whether or not we wish to, how we relate to our own possessions. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of the man who approaches Jesus, for Jesus does not; Jesus loves him. He is eager, for he runs up to Jesus, as if he wants to waste no time in "doing" what is required to achieve "eternal life" — the kingdom of heaven. He is humble, for he kneels before Jesus, and recognizes his special wisdom and authority. He is faithful, for he has followed the Law, which would make him, in Old Testament terms, a righteous man. Yet Jesus asks even more of him, something that he cannot give. Some observers have noticed that this story is like a call story; Jesus is calling the man to come and to follow. But it is the only call story in the Gospel of Mark that is not fulfilled. Because he first must go, sell, and give away, the man with many possessions declines to come and follow. His face falls, and he goes away.

Having looked the rich man in the eye, Jesus now looks at his disciples. "How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!" he tells them — especially if you are rich. "Easier," he says, "for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle." We modern listeners have sometimes worked hard to get out of what Jesus is saying, for we recognize that by the standards of the world we ourselves would be counted as "rich." Jesus's stern warning might make us rather nervous, or fearful, or depressed. What of us, we wonder? So we try to soften the

saying. Perhaps Jesus didn't really mean "camel," some have said; he meant "ship's cable"; the words are similar in Greek.

Jesus didn't really mean "eye of the needle" as in a sewing needle, others have said. "The needle," they suggest, actually referred to one of the gates of the city of Jerusalem (not that Jesus was in Jerusalem at the time he said this). A laden camel might not have an easy time threading its way through this narrow gate. By this interpretation, it would only be "difficult" to get into the kingdom of heaven. One would have to suck it up a little, maybe, or rearrange one's packages. We wouldn't expect to pass into the kingdom with all of our goods and our gear, and we might have to change a little, live right and all that. It might be *difficult*. It wouldn't be *impossible*.

But "impossible" is the word in the story. We are going to have to discard that reading, and try to understand what it is about possessions that is such an impediment. We should notice that the disciples are shocked at the idea: in those days, wealth was considered a sign of God's favour, God's blessing. Many people even today believe something similar.

Yet it's not hard to see that some particular temptations come along with money and possessions. That's leaving aside ill-gotten wealth, acquired through chicanery, dishonesty and fraud. Wealth comes with obligations and responsibilities to assist those whose means are meagre — obligations and responsibilities that we may be tempted to ignore (particularly if we've been reading Ayn Rand). It may insulate and separate us from the concerns of others; our self-sufficiency can enclose us in a beautiful and impenetrable bubble. Wealth may distract us from the world, absorbing our whole interest and effort, and it may, paradoxically, foster fearfulness, fear of losing what one has, which in turn can breed a suspicious and competitive spirit. The possession of wealth may also stifle gratitude. People who have little are often extraordinarily and openly thankful for what they have received; people with much may be prone to taking what they have for granted. And then, of course, there's pride.

If we ourselves have much in the way of the world, we do well to keep our eye on all of these temptations. But the problem for the man who approaches Jesus is not that he has defrauded anyone, and not necessarily that he has failed to live up to his obligations or has become miserly, proud, or ungrateful. It is that he has been ensnared by his possessions. He has become enslaved by them. "What's mine is mine": he is trapped in that mindset, and he does not have it in him to escape. He is eager, he is humble, and he is faithful, but he is entangled.

Jesus does not rebuke him or condemn him. He merely exposes this man's weakness.

This weakness is troubling indeed. There will always be a weakness, an impediment that will keep us from "inheriting eternal life" through our own efforts, by something, as the man says, that we might do ourselves. "For mortals," says Jesus, "it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." In the third conversation, Jesus reassures his followers. It may be the only time in Mark's Gospel that the disciples are cast in a positive light, for they have done what the man with the possessions could not do: they have "left everything" behind to follow Jesus. They are accepted, Jesus tells them. Even amidst all of their own weaknesses and missteps, they are accepted, in the community of God's kingdom.

At the end of the day, they have to rely on Jesus. At the end of the day, *we* have to rely on Jesus. Through him, we are adopted into God's household, not through any of our own efforts or actions, but solely through his grace. "What's mine is yours," he says; and we give thanks.

Now to him
who is able through the power
which is at work among us
to do immeasurably more
than all we can ask or conceive,
to him be glory
in the church and in Christ Jesus
from generation to generation for evermore! *[Ephesians 3: 20-21]*

Amen.