

## Redistribution: lessons from Mark 10, the gift economy, & my neighborhood squirrels

Mark 10:17-31

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I remember the very first religion class I took at Luther College during my freshman year, a class that seriously re-shaped my trajectory since I walked into it as a biology major. It was Intro to the New Testament, so just like the tip of the iceberg of everything but it was enough to sufficiently blow my mind as an 18 year old. And at the end of the semester, our professor Dr. Guy Nave asked which gospel was our favorite, and as we went around the circle lots of people were like, "John, it's so cool and mystical and ooh" you know. & Guy Nave said Luke and people said Matthew, familiar stories. And then I said, like the little contrarian that I was and am, "I like MARK. Because Mark is so gritty and to the point and it was written early and there's no flowery language, and Jesus does all these things and it's about resistance" Of course at the time I was only jokingly saying, "maybe I'll go to seminary someday ha ha ha"... Now here I am standing in front of you and I wonder, "Do I love Mark? Do I really?? Because it seems a little less straight-forward right about now. But there's still something about this gospel that just grabs me? Because in a way, it's \*also\* super straight forward, and how can something be so much of both?? This is one of those passages that settles into a person's bones, that one might find themselves thinking about on any given Friday as they, say, receive a paycheck, one that we hear often in the lectionary, and that still we wrestle with.

Barbara Brown Taylor says, "Most of us know this story as the story of the rich, young ruler, although Mark is the only one who suggests he is rich, Matthew is the only one who says he is young, and Luke is the only one who calls him a ruler. The fact that he shows up in all three of these gospels is a pretty good indication that his story is true, although most of us wish he had never shown up at all"

Because this is probably one of the hardest sayings in the whole Bible, at least for me, one that has the ability to kindle some anxiety and make us all shamey or squirmy or, maybe convicted. All of the above, perhaps.

So. I think it's important to situate the context of this gospel, to remember that the book we know as Mark's Gospel was written probably around the year 70 CE, when Jerusalem was in ruins at the hands of the Roman Empire, and there had been a failed Jewish revolt and the temple was destroyed and the author of Mark was writing to this very particular community, attempting to envision a kingdom in which they were free and whole and alive. Right, there's a preoccupation with life, here, and eternal life at that. All that to say, I am not gonna pluck this passage from first century Palestine and assume that Jesus is speaking directly to us and our current economy - but neither do I want to soften it. There's no way to fix this text, no loopholes that are gonna let us off the hook. I mean, really, can anyone think of a gospel passage that better exemplifies the disconnect between Jesus' teachings and the norms of our contemporary Christianity than the story?

Barbara Brown Taylor also says, "In my opinion, Christians can easily mangle this passage in two ways: the first by acting as if it were not about money, and the second by acting as if it were only about money."

Certainly, yes, this is about money. There's no way around it and Jesus does not mince words and I don't even really want to interpret what he says, simply to let him speak for himself. When the man comes up to him, Jesus does not smile blithely and fling his arms wide open and say "Absolutely nothing!" Jesus makes sure that the man cannot leave without understanding that the wealth that he has is not a byproduct of following the commandments. And honestly, I don't really think that the camel through the eye of the needle thing is solely a metaphor here, or some geographical landmark or gate that camels could only pass through unladen. I think Jesus means what he says.

But it's also not just about money.

Because Jesus also says, "You lack one thing", but a better translation would be, "You are lacking in one thing", changing the exchange here from a noun to a verb. What the man is lacking is not a certain *something* but a state of *being*, a way of being, an orientation in and toward the world by which one is bound by relationship, a relationship with Jesus and therefore identity. Mark is big into discipleship - the theme of following and staying with Jesus, imitating him, bearing our own crosses, we've heard much of it this season already.

This story, not dissimilar from the rest of the Gospel, is heavy on the verbs, and they give us clues as to what Jesus is getting at: Jesus *looks* at the man, and *loves* him. Jesus asks the man to *come* and *follow* him.

Where the rich man has come up short, then, is in the actions of looking and loving, of coming and following - all of which ask of attentiveness towards the other. A demand to look beyond oneself. His primary call is to a life of discipleship, not poverty. Jesus does not tell the man to burn his money, dig a pit and drop his belongings into it - he tells him to redistribute his wealth. Jesus calls for more than just an abandonment of financial wealth - he calls for a change to the structure of our very lives. And the man resists surrendering not only wealth, but also status and power. He leaves! He grieves! His face falls and he turns away and well don't we all just understand that body response a little too well to admit?? The social, political costs are too great, and he walks away.

Personally, I like to imagine that this man, who, let's be honest, is very relatable walks away to sit quietly and let this teaching percolate before he gathers up his gumption and goes out to do the dang thing! But can we blame him for walking away? Jesus said this out of love, not shame or humiliation, and still it's no small dose of medicine to have it be revealed that what he is lacking is not something, but everything. That wealth has worked against connection. That he's revered riches over relationship. Perfectionism and rightness over the messy, holy work of justice and peace. It is a bitter pill to swallow.

Because really, this is the danger of wealth - its lure toward a belief in utter self-sufficiency. Its sway toward a kind of power turned in on itself, for the sake of the self, and that fights to hold on to that power no matter what. And yeah this is a little sweaty to see come up in the lectionary every 3 years, because, um, we've been taught to do exactly this by our culture and our country.

It seems, dare I say, impossible for us to know and live anything but. Like wow this seems like a real downer of a sermon...

And yet. Today we hear, "Seek the Lord and live." We hear, "Satisfy us in the morning with your *steadfast love*" We hear about a God who has been laid as low as we ever have been, who sympathizes with us and gifts us mercy & grace in our time of need.

We hear the promise this week "For God, all things are possible" Deep breath.

Local pastor Tyler Sit refers to "sacred compost" - that when we receive a gift from God, ultimately we might be called to release it back. Not hoard it until it rots, not send it to the landfill where there's not enough air to decompose it - to the compost bin. This is an act of faith, that when we can't hold onto something anymore, and it's out of our hands, we believe that God - literally through microbiology or figuratively or through whatever sort of energy we can't even understand - turns that death into new life. The stuckness of our lives into new conditions for an abundant world with fruits of the kingdom and the *presence* of a new creation. We lost something yeah, but what is added is more than we could ever even have imagined. Peter says, "Look, we gave everything up" and Jesus says, "What will be added will be hundredfold."

To digress for a moment quickly, this week I've been in a very intense battle with my neighborhood squirrels. A few weeks ago I bought these cute decorative pumpkins and I was like one of the first on my block and I was really quite proud of myself for being so ahead of the game & they sat there looking so nice for two weeks, and then suddenly one day they were chewed to smithereens. Absolutely decimated. Look, I grew up in the country and did not realize that urban squirrels are absolutely ravenous for city dweller's pumpkins. You probably all knew that, but I was in for a shock. I rubbed them in cayenne pepper, I tried to scare the squirrels away, I ended up sacrificing one and setting it down in the garden, at which time they decided they wanted the other fresh one on the stoop and demolished that one as well. So. I bought more. Weird, warty gourds and tiny little white pumpkins, trying to fake them out. But yeah you already see what's happening, they nibbled on them and now my pumpkins in various states of being eaten are just sitting around my house. Nobody in my neighborhood can see them, they're just \* for \* me, because I could not let them have them.

But then, on Friday late afternoon, I saw this illustration on an instagram page called White Artists for Racial Justice, and it was of these four squirrels gathering acorns and wheeling them around in wheelbarrows and it just said in big block capital letters "REDISTRIBUTE" and I thought gahh they're right. This is my sermon and these freaking squirrels are shoving it in my face. I should probably just let them eat the pumpkins. And the Spirit connected some dots in my vengeful mind. Because that illustration reminded me that tomorrow we hold space for Indigenous People's Day. And when I connected those dots about redistribution, about sharing and generosity and about giving land back, I thought of Robin Wall Kimmerer, member of the Potawatomi Nation & author of *Braiding Sweetgrass*. And I remembered that last winter

Kimmerer wrote the most stunning piece on a type of berry, the serviceberry, titled "An Economy of Abundance". In it, she considers the ethic of reciprocity that lies at the heart of the gift economy, this was a new term for me and I highly recommend you read this article, and she asks how we can learn from Indigenous wisdom and ecological systems to reimagine currencies of exchange? I accept the gift of berries from a bush, and then spread that gift with a dish of berries to my neighbor, who makes a pie to share with his friend, who feels so wealthy in food and friendship that he volunteers at the food pantry, and so forth. Status is determined not by how much one accumulates, but by how much one gives away. The currency in a gift economy is relationship, expressed as gratitude, as interdependence. A gift economy enhances mutual well-being; the economic unit is "We" rather than "I", as all flourishing is mutual.

This is what I hear as today's good news - that the Kin-dom we're called to follow Jesus to, to build, is like no other kingdom we know or have ever known. A kin-dom that does not operate in a mode of scarcity. A kin-dom in which each member has an abundance of something which they offer to others. Where wealth and security come from the quality of relationships. And though this might sound like an impossible task, we proclaim today that it is possible. This is what hooked 18-year old Hannah, and it's what still has its hold on 28-year old Hannah. That what seems like death, to the way of the world that we know it, is in fact new life. Through the work of the Spirit already breathing and blowing in our midst, through Christ who looks at us and loves us despite our stuckness and our failings, through a Creator who calls us to something so much bigger than ourselves. A Creator who has already set the world to this natural wisdom if we but pay attention.

May we have the courage to just share our pumpkins, to trust in the process of sacred compost, and to join a gritty, to the point Jesus on the journey towards reimagining a world of gifts upon gifts.

Amen.