

Sell everything you have and give the money away?! Last Sunday I quoted a post from the Vibrant Faith website:

“I have discovered that the best way for me to get closer to Jesus and learn more about what makes him tick is to look for the things He said and did that are hard to understand — I call them, ‘Jesus potholes.’” Here’s another. Mark’s Gospel, especially, chronicles a lot of things Jesus said that can make us profoundly uncomfortable.

We can be confused by “Gospel” as “Good News,” if we think of good news as something that allows us to just keep on being and doing what we want to be and do — and not as the word of God described in Hebrews as “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow, ...able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart...”

I once had an infection in my thumb, down under the thumbnail. “It needs to be lanced,” the doctor said.

He gave me novocaine and then proceeded to stab me, causing pain worse even than childbirth. Ayeeee!

And then it stopped, the pus drained, the infection healed. Good news. We make a mistake when we think of the Gospel as comfy and ego-gratifying.

In fact, the Gospel is profoundly radical, radical meaning “root.” Jesus was never one to find meaning in surface appearances; he went to the heart of things, the root.

And so, here is this man who comes running up just as Jesus is setting out on a journey someplace. You can imagine the scene. Not that Jesus minded changing his plans.

But he seems a little taken aback by the words that burst out of the man’s mouth without preamble: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Not, “bon voyage,” or even, “hi.” More like “engage with me in a philosophical conversation

about the nature of good and evil and how I can make out okay in the end.” Startling, wouldn’t you say?

What do we know about this man? Well, I guess you could start with “impetuous.” Maybe “passionate.” He recognizes Jesus as a teacher.

Mark’s version doesn’t specify but the other synoptic Gospels, Matthew and Luke, call him young. And rich. And a ruler. Clearly a person of privilege. But also driven by longing.

He really wants to know. And Jesus, looking at him, loved him. How much God values our desires, our searching, our longing, because ultimately, our longings all come back to God.

But that’s not always evident to us. Two words in the text tell us more about this young man. He says, “What must I *do* to *inherit* eternal life?”

First, however, Jesus addresses the Good Teacher part. Is this man really interested in learning about goodness, deep in the roots of his being,

or is he seeking a superficial answer, a simple formula from a recognized rabbi? “Why do you call me good?” Jesus asks. “No one is good but God alone.”

And he proceeds to list what makes for conventional goodness: keeping the commandments, the rules that all well-brought up young men should be expected to keep.

Maybe that *is* what he’s asking. The form of his question suggests that: “what must I *do...*” and how to “*inherit...*”

In Matthew, the man asks, “What good deed must I do to have [to “get”] eternal life?” words of an exchange mentality, the common basis for human social and economic systems.

“Quid pro quo” “You get what you pay for” “I worked for it, I deserve it, it’s mine...” “You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours.”

Yet there is the longing. The young man is asking a *spiritual* question, a question of depths and ultimates and roots, the realm not of reward but of relationship.

The dynamic life of Spirit requires a different mindset from exchange and inherit.

In ancient Israel and throughout the Ancient Near East, it was supposed that wealth indicated God’s favor.

If you were “good,” God would be pleased, and would reward you accordingly. Wealth was valued, admired. I’m not sure but that isn’t the case in our own times and culture, the cult of celebrity that equated leadership with wealth, even inherited wealth that had actually been squandered,

the admiration of success in churches whose pastors preach the prosperity gospel and travel in limos and jets,

the awe inspired by media magnates enamored of space travel. Rich young rulers looking for God?

The worship of wealth. Never mind the words of Amos and the recognition that it is difficult to separate accumulation of wealth from exploitation, at least on some level.

“...because you trample on the poor,” says Amos, “and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone...and planted pleasant vineyards.

“But,” he goes on, “you shall not live in those houses nor drink the wine from your vineyards

because you have turned justice to wormwood, hating reproof and abhorring the [prophet, the] one who speaks the truth.

The Hebrew Prophets—and Jesus—have a different understanding, a clearer recognition that in Spirit-dynamics,

in the ways of God, it is justice, flagrant generosity, mercy, and most of all, humility and gratitude that reflect the goodness of God,

as in the natural world where one tree produces a ga-jillion seeds every season and the sun rises and sets gloriously, for free, every single day.

“Go, dear beloved of God,” says Jesus to the young man. “Sell everything you have, give it away.

Treasure in heaven, treasure in the life of Spirit, connection with God is what you really long for.” Then come back and follow me.

Accumulation of wealth is just that: cumulative. Which is what we learn from a more comprehensive awareness of the history of racism and privilege in our country.

The GI Bill made home ownership available to soldiers at the end of WW II—if they were white. If not, subtle and not so subtle barriers were put in place. Red-lining, block-busting.

Home ownership in the US became the single most significant predictor of accumulation of wealth.

Owning your own home meant having assets that could be passed on to your children. It meant opportunities for investments

that could be passed on to your children, educational opportunities that translated into better jobs and more assets for your children to inherit.

Inheritance becomes entitlement. “What must I do to *inherit* eternal life?”

But the dynamic spiritual world operates differently from the exchange and inheritance mentality of human social and economic systems.

And so the young seeker is shocked and goes away grieving. As does Jesus. “It’s hard,” he says to the disciples,

“hard to receive the kingdom of heaven when we are trained in the exchange mentality that accompanies accumulated wealth.

It’s hard to experience the unguarded freedom of the kingdom of heaven when we have to protect our wealth—because by its nature, wealth demands “protection.”

It’s hard to enter the generous kingdom of heaven when entitlement and exclusivity have been our presumed status.

“Then how...?” we say. Where’s the good news in this?!

One response, my most common response, is judgment. “Those” rich people. I read an article this week about how we love to create villains and play the good guys.

But I know very well my participation in the exchange and inherited privilege mindset, how much angst I carry around i

n relation to money, how much I want, by my own “goodness,” to earn my way into the kingdom of heaven.

I know how invested I am in my possessions, even if they are shelves of books rather than racks of clothes or flashy cars.

I know how hard it is to hear Jesus’ words, “...many who are first will be last and the last first...” when I was so proud of my grades, SAT scores and top of the class status.

The pain in my thumb would be nothing compared with having to squeeze through the eye of a needle.

But here's the Good News, Part 1: It lies in the words of the text, "Jesus, looking at him, loved him."

For Jesus, there is no villain, no condemnation; there is only grace. With Jesus, there is simply offering: I see you, I love you,

I know your desire, your seeking, your longing for the kingdom of God. I understand. I have felt that way too.

And this I know. The kingdom of God is not for the earning; it is not for the inheriting; it is not for the grasping or the holding.

It is only for the relinquishment, the letting go, the divesting. Here is where we allow the work of the Holy Spirit within us,

the work of the living and active word of God to excise the infection of addiction and attachment to trying to satisfy the longing with anything other than God.

It's just that that's Gospel-hard.

But here is Good News, Part 2: From Hebrews, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,

but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, [though sinless]. Therefore let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Welcome to the kingdom of heaven. Amen.