

Sermon October 13, 2024

I speak to you in the name of God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please be seated.

Beginning last week and over the coming weeks leading up to the season of Advent, we will be focusing on the Gospel of Mark. Mark is a very interesting book because it is often a story of conflict; particularly the many conflicts between Christ's messages about the kingdom of God and the thinking and practices of the high priests and the Roman occupation. Jesus continually challenges those in authority, and the Gospel of Mark documents how he uses his ministry to bring about change. When we listen to or read Mark carefully, we can come to understand that Jesus is really bringing about a massive change to the history of the people of Israel. He is taking the very daring step of bringing religious beliefs to bear on the social, political, and economic life of the Jewish people. This was a very dangerous because, in doing so, he was challenging not only the power and authority of the high priests, but also challenging the power and the authority of the Roman Empire.

For those of us living in the 21st century, we can also see that Christ's ministry as it is described in Mark was about what we now call *social justice*. At its core, social justice is about the fair treatment of all individuals and social groups within a state or society. It is about the equitable distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society. It is about respecting and protecting human rights. At the point where we join the Gospel story for today from Mark 10, Jesus has shifted his ministry from being based around Galilee to moving more into Israelite territory. From this point until his crucifixion, Jesus is focusing on teaching.

In this morning's episode from Mark 10, Jesus and the disciples encounter a wealthy man who wants to know what he needs to do in order to enter heaven. The response that Jesus gives was considered at the time to be a very radical one. If we look at the meaning of the word "radical" as it was used at that time, it actually is a reference to the root of a plant or the root of a problem; giving a radical response meant challenging the assumptions around an argument that got at the root of the issue. What the rich man is asking is not so

much about the steps that he needs to take to eventually enter heaven so much as he is asking about what it means to be identified as a disciple and what it means to truly belong to the Christian movement.

The wealthy man assures Jesus that he has followed the 10 Commandments since his childhood, and yet this rich man remains concerned that he is missing something. Somewhere in his soul, this rich man knows that there must be more that he should be doing if he is to truly shift his identity as a Jewish man towards becoming a disciple of Christ; a Christian. Jesus responds to him by saying, '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.' The passage goes on to say that the wealthy man was quite shocked by this response and left with a heavy heart because he was being asked to give up all of his possessions and all of his money and all of his comforts and security to the poor. We can also think that part of the shock was being told that he lacked something because the idea of "lacking" was associated with poverty and not with wealth. The man had assumed that, because of his riches, he automatically lacked nothing. And yet, here was Jesus telling him exactly that; giving him a radical response that forced him to look at the assumptions that underpinned his thinking. The other shock would have been the idea of giving up all that he had and then following Jesus and the other disciples. Given the time and the place at which this Gospel was written, it would be fair to assume that the rich man was a landholder and that he had slaves. We do not know if he inherited his wealth or if he was able to accumulate it in his own lifetime. But Jesus is asking him to give up the legacy that he inherited or planned to leave to his children and to distribute the sale of his assets to the poor. This is where the idea of social justice comes in and is part of the "add on" to the 10 Commandments that Jesus was teaching.

When the 10 Commandments were given to Moses on Mount Sinai, the issue of unequal distribution of wealth was really not so much of an issue amongst the Hebrews. They were out in the desert with Moses and they all had essentially the same levels of wealth and the same levels of poverty; basically, they had nothing. We know that they had taken some gold and other "stuff" when they left Egypt, but gold doesn't have any value

when you are out in the middle of the desert and there is nothing to buy or to trade it for. But in the time between Moses and Christ, a very significant gap between the rich and the poor had developed and there was a lot of stigma associated with poverty. The poor were often at the mercy of the rich. And that is what is at the heart of this story. In and of itself, there is nothing wrong with being rich or with being poor as it is described in Mark's Gospel. The issue for Jesus and for the social justice movement is the unequal distribution of wealth. The word "wealth" or "wealthy" appears 122 times in the Bible, while the words "poor" and "poverty" appear 238 times. Those are big numbers that tell us that there was a real problem; not terribly different from what we see today in the gap between the rich and the poor. It is also interesting to note that, in the first 300 years of the Christian Church, the Christian movement was best known for poverty relief; for taking care of the poor and the hungry and doing what it could to ensure that everyone had enough.

We know that the rich man in the Gospel story did not take Jesus up on the offer to follow him because the man walked away, apparently quite sad about the idea of having to give up everything. The disciples, particularly Peter, question Jesus about this exchange with the rich man. Peter reminds Jesus that the disciples have already given up everything and followed him. And so, to Peter's logic, this should guarantee them a place in heaven. But Jesus again gives a radical response by challenging Peter's assumptions. He tells them that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a person who is rich in terms of money and assets to enter heaven; essentially because the wealthy have not taken the opportunity to share their bounty with the poor. Further to this, Jesus reminds them that it is the grace of God which will ultimately allow them into heaven because God does not keep a scorecard of our good deeds. He reminds them that all things are possible with God because God is not limited in the ways in which we are. God is without limits. Finally, Jesus closes the conversation by reminding the disciples that they are creatures with a dual nature; they are human beings who inhabit mortal bodies during their lifetimes on Earth, but that they are also spiritual beings who can transcend to an eternal life in heaven. The choices that we make during our mortal lifetimes will have a bearing on what happens after we die.

This Sunday, as we mark Canadian Thanksgiving, we are reminded that we enjoy many advantages and many blessings. But we are also reminded by Mark's Gospel that we are called to engage in sharing that relative wealth with those who have less. Sometimes that means those who have less money, food, or shelter and sometimes it means those who have less hope, less love, and less of a sense of belonging. It was very interesting to me to review the pledge sheets that came in from our recent stewardship campaign and to read about the many ministries across ACPC that are geared towards social justice in terms of working towards bring about a more equitable distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within our community. As a member of the Pictou County Council of Churches, ACPC supports disaster relief efforts around the world, as well as more local needs such as the HelpLine for those in crisis and the fuel fund for those in our community who struggle with the high costs of heating their homes.

Other ministries of ACPC that help to support our community include: the palliative care snack donation program; the pillowcase ministry with handmade cases in a butterfly theme, and the prayer/comfort shawl and lap blanket ministry for patients in palliative care; the Food Bank ministry and support for the Opportunity Shop; collecting and donating school supplies for local children; the CAIRN ministry to support refugees; and the Pastoral Care Team who engage with those in need of encouragement, friendship, prayers, home communion, nursing home worship times, and reminders that we are all valued children of God. By sharing our time, talent, and treasure with the broader community, we are all working towards the kind of social justice that Jesus speaks about throughout the Gospel of Mark. And for that, I give thanks to God. Amen.