

I

Shortly before my last semester of college, I met with my advisor, and together we reviewed all the credits I had earned to date. With only one semester left to go before graduation, she wanted to ensure that I had accumulated all of the courses necessary to complete my degree programs.

And as she reviewed my transcript, a shadow crossed her face, and she said, “It looks like you are missing one thing. “You still need to take a non-US based upper-level humanities course.”

And that’s how it came to pass that as a second-semester senior about to complete degrees in business and journalism, I found myself enrolled in a course titled, “German Civilization from Beginning to 1850.”

I’m so glad that my advisor was able to take one look at my records and see the one thing that I lacked.

II

All of us need those kinds of people in our lives, don’t we? All of us need people who can take one look at us and love us enough to tell us when something isn’t quite right, a little off kilter, not complete – whether it’s a zipper that didn’t quite make it all the way to the top, or something in our teeth, or something more serious.

In her book titled *Dare to Lead*, Brenne Brown says that every single person, no matter how high they may be in an organization, no matter how

wealthy or powerful or impressive they may be, needs people in their lives who love them enough to tell them the truth when they’re missing the mark.

III

And that brings us to this morning’s story from Mark’s gospel. Jesus and the disciples are on the move again, and as they’re walking along, a man runs up to Jesus and asks him a question about what he must do to inherit eternal life.

And at first, Jesus gives him sort of a stock answer about keeping the commandments. But when the man persists in his questioning of Jesus, Mark tells us that Jesus took one look at him, loved him, and pointed out to him the one thing that he lacked.

So with that background in mind, I invite you to listen for a Word from God from Mark 10:17-31.

As he 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?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 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.’” He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.”

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.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

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!” 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! 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.”

They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” 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, 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. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

Both Matthew and Luke tell this same story in their gospel accounts. Matthew adds the detail that the man was young, and Luke describes him as a certain ruler. Over the years, we have

conflated these accounts together to refer to the man who queries Jesus about how to inherit eternal life as “The Rich Young Ruler.”

Rich.

Young.

Ruler.

From the outside looking in, this unnamed man appears to have it all. He’s got money. He’s got power. And he’s young, which ostensibly brings with it vigor and vitality. And let’s not forget that he’s a *he*, which in those days and in that culture also brings with it considerable privilege and agency. From the outside looking in, he appears to lack nothing.

Which makes it all the more intriguing when Jesus, takes one look at him, loves him, and says, “You’re only missing one thing.”

What could this wealthy, powerful, young man possibly lack?

I submit to you that what this wealthy, powerful, privileged young man lacked even the most basic, rudimentary understanding of the word stewardship.

Stewardship is one of those church words that over the years the church has overused to the point where we have come to equate it with money. When we hear the word stewardship in church, we have come to think that it must be time for the annual fundraising drive, that it’s time for the pastor’s once-a-year sermon on the amount - or that we’re about to build something, or that

we have built something and we're trying to pay it off.

But in my own walk with Christ, I have discovered that stewardship isn't about my wallet. Stewardship is about my heart. Stewardship is about properly understanding the relationship between God and all things.

Psalm 24:1 says, "The Lord made the earth, and all that is therein, the world and the people in it."

A biblical understanding of power and possessions and wealth teaches that God is the creator and giver of all things, and God entrusts some of God's incredible wealth and generosity to us.

Here's a short illustration of what I mean. Some scientists made a breakthrough. They discovered how to create human life from just the dust of the earth, in the same way that God created the first man. So they request and are granted an audience with God, and they go and stand before the throne of God and they say, "Lord, we have discovered how to create human life from nothing, just as you did." And God says, "That sounds impressive. Let me see what you've got."

And so one scientist bends down to scoop up a handful of dirt to begin the demonstration, but God interrupts. "Whoa whoa whoa!" says God. "Go make your own dirt!"

A biblical understanding of power and privilege and wealth and possessions teaches that God is the creator and owner of all things, and in

out of God's goodness and generosity, God entrusts us with the management and stewardship of a portion of what rightfully belongs to God.

Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said, "You lack one thing." What the rich young ruler lacked was even the most basic understanding of the biblical concept of stewardship. And so when Jesus the Christ told him to go, sell what he owned, give the money to the poor, and then come and follow him, the rich young ruler walked away shocked and grieving, for he had many possessions.

Although a more accurate statement might be, "He went away shocked and grieving, for many possessions had him."

By all accounts, he was a good guy. When he told Jesus that he had kept the commandments from his youth, there is no reason to believe that he wasn't telling the truth. But Jesus looked at him and loved him and immediately saw that he lacked one thing: a basic biblical understanding of stewardship. And because he lacked that understanding, he couldn't bring himself to accept Jesus' invitation to extravagant generosity and discipleship.

When Jesus told his disciples that it will be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich person to enter the kingdom of God, the disciples were astounded. In their day, much like in ours, it was commonly believed that wealth and power and possessions could buy just about anything. The point that Jesus is making is that having wealth

and privilege and power has a tendency to cause people to forget the source of that wealth and power and privilege. It has a tendency to cause those who have it to forget their place - they are not owners – they are managers.

But the money itself is not the issue. Money is amoral, that is, it has no morality of its own. It's what happens when it comes in contact with us that gives it its moral valence. It's like a brick. A brick has no morality of its own. You can put some bricks in hands, and those hands can use those bricks to build a school, or a home, or a hospital. Those same bricks can also be used to hit someone over the head or be thrown through a window.

IV

My friend, there is nothing in the world wrong with having some money. There is everything in the world wrong with having you. In the gospels, Jesus has far more to say about money, and power, and privilege, and wealth, than he does about any other issue. Jesus doesn't want or need your money, my friend. What Jesus wants, what he's after, what he's asking you to give, can't be bought or sold at any price. What Jesus wants from you more than anything, my friend, is your heart.

Despite what it might say on the title to your car or on the deed to your house, despite what it might say on your bank statement or brokerage account, ultimately, you don't own a thing. Even your family and your friends don't belong to you. Everything you are,

everything you have, everything you will be, is a gift to you from a God who is exceedingly, extravagantly generous, a God who so loved the world that God gave his only Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not be possessed by their possessions, whosoever believes in him shall not be hesitant to be generous, whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have life abundant, and life eternal.

The instructions Jesus gave to the rich young ruler about how to inherit eternal life were an invitation, an invitation to receive from Jesus the one things he so clearly lacked - contentment and peace and wholeness. And the invitation Jesus extends to the rich young ruler is the same one he extends to you this day, my friend. All you have to do is open your hands and your heart.

V

We talk a lot about giving and generosity in this church. But it's not because we're so concerned with funding the operating budget or paying off the debt. It's because how we manage the resources that God has entrusted to us says something about what we believe. A budget is more than a listing of income and expenses. A budget tells a story about what a given organization believes to be true and what it expects of its members and friends.

As a church, we can do so many things so very well. We can keep all the commandments. We can observe all of

the holy days. We can have amazing programs and incredible staff and first-rate facilities.

But let us never forget who and whose we are. Let us never forget that none of this belongs to First Presbyterian Church, nor is it held in trust for the use and benefit of the Presbyterian Church (USA). All of this has been entrusted to us by a God who loves us so much, who so wants to be with us, that God did not withhold even God's own Son from us.

So let us be faithful stewards of the gifts that God has entrusted to us. Let us accept Jesus' invitation to extravagant generosity and dedicated discipleship. For nothing is impossible for God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.