

February 18th: Inherit

This Fall we returned to the Narrative Lectionary—a year long collection of readings that take us from the origins of God’s people to the first century world. These readings are chosen on purpose, because they help us trace a particular theme throughout our scripture texts—and this year our theme is “Love in Action.” In each of these passages, there’s a compelling action that is embedded into the narrative, that I want us to be paying attention to and practicing this week. Of course, we know that love is the most important verb of all, so we’ll also be tracing how God’s love was shown to our spiritual ancestors and discover how God’s love is still being shown to us today.

As we study together, I want to remind us that the goal isn’t simply to increase our knowledge of God—the goal is to increase in love towards God and towards each other. The goal is to increase our love in action, this week and every week, so that our world can more and reflect God’s enduring love for all of creation.

Before we dive into our text, would you pray with me?

Abundant God, we are not always people who can see and appreciate the bounty that you have given us. We notice what we lack much more than we notice what we have been blessed with—we count the money in our bank accounts instead of counting the depth of our relationships or the joy of helping others. We count the items that we desire, instead of noticing the beauty of creation, or the community around us. Help us this morning to refocus our attention on the things that matter most to you and to your kingdom, so that we might be disciples who bring those blessings and beauty to your hurting world. Amen.

Today we return to the life of Jesus, and in particular, a book called the Gospel of Mark. This account of Jesus’ ministry is the one that we’ve been focusing on over the past few weeks, and we’ll continue to read through this text until Easter Sunday. It’s one of four gospel accounts, and when we read them together, we get a diverse and holistic picture of Jesus, but each of these stories brings something unique to the table.

One thing that I really like about Mark's gospel is that he tends to record conversations in a very direct and no-nonsense way—so in these passages we get to see a more raw and more practical Jesus than in the accounts of biblical authors like Luke and John. Those authors tend to focus on more theological concepts or complex ideas, but Mark's version of Jesus is very down to earth and humble. In these stories, we often see that Jesus is very much a part of the culture of his time—he's a wandering teacher and mystic, who draws a crowd and leads his followers to different cities and towns where he teaches and heals the sick. Because Jesus is very attuned to his Jewish roots and his place within an oppressive, imperialist society, he often speaks about the religious and political power dynamics that are at play, and he's not a stranger to arguments with his spiritual and cultural rivals.

In the narratives that we've read thus far, you might remember that he's often placing himself in situations where he has passionate discussions and challenging moments with other people. He calls out injustice, and fights for fairness. He speaks out against certain practices, or encourages people to think differently about the realities that they are facing. Including realities about money.

You might be thinking to yourself—but Pastor Meg, aren't we done with our Stewardship Campaign, and aren't we done with talking about money for another year? Well technically yes, to the first question, but no to the second.

You see, Jesus talks about money with almost alarming frequency during his ministry, more than other topics that you might consider to be more “spiritual” or “religious” or “biblical.” Jesus has a lot to say about finances and resources in general, because he understands that how we think about our resources has a direct relationship to how we act when we are in relationship and in community with each other. Let me say that again: how we think about our resources has a direct relationship to our behavior.

Thinking about our resources and what we have access to is a huge part of our daily lives, as most of us can probably attest. In the tough economic times that we're facing right now, many of us probably spend a lot of our current

brainpower thinking about our income, debt, assets, required payments, and taxes that are due, but we also think about the food in the fridge and how long it will last us, or the clothes in our closet and what might need to be replaced. There are lots of resources to worry about right now, I get that.

And when we're worried about these things, or when we're stuck in a scarcity mindset, we tend to hoard the resources that we do have access to. It becomes hard for us to let go of them. This is pretty natural, because at its core, it's an attempt at self-preservation. We want to protect ourselves, we want to prevent suffering, we want to keep our families safe. Because Jesus is functionally a homeless man reliant on the generosity of others, I think he gets this too, at least on a practical level. But in the conversation that we're going to examine this morning, he has an interesting proposition for someone who is seemingly stuck in a cycle of economic worry or scarcity mindset.

So let's take a closer look at our passage for today.

Our story starts with a specific encounter and specific question. Verse 17 begins this way: "As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus had talked about salvation and eternal life a few times at this point, so this question doesn't come out of nowhere. On the surface, it seems like a simple question, or at least it could be—the man simply wants to know how to access this promise that Jesus has offered. He needs to know the procedure, the exact steps he needs to take in order to receive what Jesus has taught.

But when I read this passage, I thought to myself that Jesus doesn't really like this man's question. Verses 18 and 19 tell us that the conversation continued this way: "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.'" Basically, in these verses, Jesus reminds the man of his religious obligation to follow the

commandments given to Moses—a very easy to follow formula. However, the man responds, “Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.”

And so now we reach a little bit of a turning point in verse 21, when Jesus issues a new command to the man in question. We read, “Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

But despite the man's earlier desire for an answer, we learn that this is not the answer that he expected or desired. Verse 22 says, “At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.” So this wealthy man makes a choice in this moment not to do what Jesus asked, even though it would provide him the object of his desire. He chooses his resources over this promise that Jesus has offered. He didn’t want to let go of the things that he owned, and so he walked away from this encounter without the eternal life that he was seeking. He just gives up.

And I think the reason that he has so much reluctance to do what Jesus asked is embedded in his initial question. As a reminder, the man comes to Jesus and asks, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” I think the verb here—the verb “to inherit,” says a lot about this man’s mindset when it comes to his resources.

As far as verbs go, this is a pretty common one in the Bible. In the New Testament, we see it a total of 18 times, so we know that this idea of being an heir or receiving an inheritance is a familiar concept—both in that particular culture, and in a more spiritual sense. Jesus had previously used this verb in his famous Sermon on the Mount, when he declared, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” and in a conversation recorded in Matthew 19, in which he stated, “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.”

We even see it in the closing chapters of Matthew’s gospel, where Jesus gathers with his disciples just days before his death. He tells them a parable

about sheep and goats, and says to them, “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’”

So we can see that there’s this strong connection between this idea of inheritance, the Kingdom of God, and eternal life. In all these passages, including our story for today, these concepts are all interwoven together into one bigger picture. It’s difficult to extricate one from the others, because Jesus seems certain that they exist together as a future reality. The Kingdom of God is the inheritance that we receive, and living in that Kingdom is the eternal life that has been promised.

When I think about this verb, “to inherit,” I think about receiving something—it’s a posture of being given something that wasn’t there before. Inheritance is something that is passed down from one person to another, like a gift. But it’s what I call a “one way” verb. Inheritance flows one direction—it’s not something that is reciprocal, right? In our current cultural context, when we read someone’s will and are given a bequest, there’s not an expectation that we give something back, is there? And so when we inherit something, I think there’s a tendency to see it as a passive action. When we inherit, we don’t have to do anything, we just receive someone else’s action.

But I think that this interpretation of the verb isn’t exactly in line with Jesus’ thinking here. In fact, I think there are three things that I think Jesus wants us to know about this inheritance that is offered to this wealthy man, and by extension, all of us.

Number one, I want us to know that this inheritance of eternal life is rooted in God’s love for us. Mark is careful to remind us that Jesus’ words to this man seeking answers is first and foremost a response of love. We hear that Jesus’ challenge to man to sell all he has is rooted in this personal and cosmic

connection—not rooted in a desire for punishment due to the man’s riches or a desire to induce deprivation. Jesus gives this man the instructions he does because he loves him with his whole heart, and he desires to see the wholeness and justice of God’s kingdom come to fruition in and through him.

And that brings us to number two: I want us to know that although this inheritance of eternal life is something that we receive, it is not something to hoard or hide away—it has been and always will be a gift that is meant to be shared. Unlike the riches that the man in this passage holds onto, God’s gift to us is intended to be given away. Our inheritance is so big and so powerful and so transformative that we will not be able to keep it for ourselves. When we receive it, it will change our life so much that we will not be able to stop ourselves from spreading the wealth as far and as wide as possible.

Finally, number three: the gift that we receive isn’t a static thing or an object at all, but a divine responsibility. When we enter into God’s Kingdom, it becomes a task that we undertake, it’s a mission that we are drafted into. We cannot remain still, or passive, or on the sidelines. It calls us into loving action that mirrors God’s love for us.

Because of these three things, I want us to reframe this verb, “to inherit.” Because of these three things, I want us to no longer consider it a “one way” verb, something that only goes from God to us, but a verb that compels our own response. A response that we make today, or this week, or as we enter into a new season in our walk of faith.

The wealthy man chose to turn away from this encounter with Jesus with only his material goods, and I think a fair amount of confusion and regret. But that doesn’t have to be our story.

My friends, we could spend our whole lives clinging to the possessions and the resources that we hope will keep us protected and safe, but our text tells us that this death grip on worldly things will not bring us the peace and the safety that we crave. I know we all want that security and protection, but that’s not where we are going to find it. We could spend every week desperate to hold onto our money and our status symbols, we could spend all of our human

lives worrying about keeping up with the Joneses, or being perceived in a certain way, we could use all of our time to focus on hoarding more and more and more—but those things will never measure up to the inheritance of eternal life that is offered to us.

Jesus invites us into a Kingdom that radically redefines what it means to be worthy—where we are welcomed based on our generosity rather than our possessions, our humility instead of our bank accounts, and our love rather than our accomplishments. So when we accept that kind of inheritance, and when we participate in that kind of Kingdom, we will surely find what our souls have always longed for. As you leave here today, I want you to know that Jesus looks at you, yes you, with more love than you could possibly imagine, and he asks us to join him in making this world a more just, more compassionate, more equitable place.

The choice is yours, the inheritance is yours—all you need to do is say yes.

Amen.