

Sermon – Mark 10:17-31; Amos 5:6-7, 10-15
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“Possession Possession”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Well done, everyone. You're here! You made it. Whether you're sitting in Grace's beautiful sanctuary today or joining us from the comfort of your own home via livestream, you're here. Really, this is good. So much better than *not* being here. We gather today to come into the presence of Jesus, and there's nothing about *that* that isn't good. Because Jesus is good, and because we come with the best of intentions. Surprisingly, that's exactly where we get tripped up; it is precisely the bringing of our best intentions into Jesus' presence that messes us up. Jesus, however, is having none of it. Jesus has a word for us today, wielded as a warrior handles a double-edged sword. So, I'm glad you're here, good intentions and all. But it may not be as comfortable as we might like; not for you, and not for me.
2. The man comes into the presence of Jesus with the best of intentions. He's earnest, likeable. He's not a Pharisee looking to trap Jesus or a Sadducee looking to undermine him. There are no tricks or traps in his question, just honest inquiry: "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" This is not an unreasonable question. It's the same question we ask about so many things in our lives: What do I have to do? In our jobs, our homes, our relationships, we are constantly – and often appropriately – asking what we need to do. Most of my days begin with the crafting of a to-do list; the crossing off of items is a dependable bringer of joy. Look what I've done! The

problem, of course, is that this isn't what Jesus is looking for from us and, if it were, we would fail miserably.

3. I can imagine Jesus chuckling to himself when this man says that he's kept the commandments since his youth. I'm sure Jesus is aware of a few transgressions, but he likes this guy, so he lets him get away with it. But only, perhaps, because Jesus knows how best to come after him. "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 man is cut to the core. In the middle of the interchange, we read that Jesus loves him and looks at him, but the Greek points us in a slightly different direction. Jesus, who does love this man, does not so much look *at* him as he looks *into* him. Jesus isn't interested in how the man appears. Sure, he looks like an upstanding, law-abiding citizen. But Jesus can see his heart, and his heart is possessed by his possessions. So many of Jesus' signs and miracles, particularly in Mark's narrative, are exorcisms. The casting out of demons. Jesus, looking into this man's heart, sees a demon of the man's own making. He suffers from possession possession. He cannot let go of his things because his things will not let go of him. Unable to let go of his wealth, he lets go of Jesus and walks away in grief. He came with the best of intentions but with a sickness in his heart that was nothing less than idolatry. Given the choice – *the choice* – between Jesus and his stuff, he chooses his stuff. He does so in spite of the fact that eternal life comes only with Christ. All his stuff has to offer is an eternally crowded basement that his kids will have to clean out when he's dead. Who would choose such a thing? One who is possessed; one who has fallen into idolatry. His intentions can't save him. This man can't save himself. He is undone.
4. The disciples are left reeling. To be sure, they don't have the bank account or the real estate portfolio of the other guy, but they understand what Jesus is saying. Jesus drives home the point: "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.” For two thousand years, commentators and interpreters have heard these words in much the same way that Lloyd responds to Mary in the 1994 cinematic masterpiece, *Dumb and Dumber*, when she tells him that there’s a one-in-a-million chance of the two of them ending up in a romantic relationship. To this hyperbolic comment, the literalist Lloyd responds, “So you’re telling me there’s a chance!” Spoiler alert: Lloyd and Mary don’t end up together. In the same way, Jesus is *not* saying that there’s a small chance we can earn our way into the kingdom. He’s not talking about an actual gate in Jerusalem that people called the Eye of the Needle that was difficult, but possible, to get a camel through. Spoiler alert: people made that up to soften Jesus’ words. No, Jesus’ point, understood perfectly by the disciples, is that it is impossible – for the man or for them, for you or for me – to do anything to get into the Kingdom. Perhaps because of our wealth, especially in this community. But whatever it is, we are all prone to letting something that isn’t God occupy the center of our heart, something that we have idolatrously turned into a false god, that we don’t want to give up. We all have, to turn to a film (and a book!) with more gravitas, something precious to us that we will chase after even as it eats us alive, just as Gollum seeks the One Ring to his final undoing in *The Lord of the Rings*. And, like the young man, even though it grieves us, we simply will not relinquish our death grip on that thing, whatever it is, even though Jesus stands in front of us with the Kingdom on offer.

5. So, what do we do? No. Enough. That’s the wrong question. There is nothing we can do to inherit eternal life, and nothing we need to do. They say they can’t take it with you when you die. Well, I suppose the only thing to do then is drop dead. To be set free of our possessions and all that possesses us, we need to die. In walks Christ, looking into us, loving us, dying for us that we might be pierced with the two-edged sword that brings life through death. Perhaps this is why babies sometimes cry when they’re baptized. They know,

deep down, that this is not some cute ritual. It is a matter of death and life – but always, thank God *always*, in that order. Out of death, paved with the best of intentions, we are drawn by Christ into newness of life. Alive, we are called now to live like it.

6. 750 years, give or take, before the coming of Christ, Amos prophesied to the people of Israel. Speaking of good intentions, I had every intention of devoting a good portion of this sermon to our passage from Amos. But here we are, with things already winding down. So, I'll keep it short. During the time of Amos, under the rule of Jeroboam II, things seemed to be going well. The well-to-do had it made. Their wealth was built, however, upon the backs of the poor. And not because they were hardworking folks who earned it while the poor were lazy ne'er-do-wells. No, the rich were rich because they were cheats who were willing to game the system – they were willing to *create* a system – to subvert the economy and corrupt the courts of law so that they could trample on the poor. And why were they willing to do this? Because they had abandoned worship of the one true God. It turns out that having something that's not God at the center of their lives led them to treat other humans as disposable, mostly so they could get more junk for themselves. Amos's message has not lost its relevance. I am no prophet, but God has not changed God's mind about what is expected of us. Love God. Love neighbor. Everything else is a self-serving lie leading nowhere. Receiving the promises of God as gifts, we are free to do what God expects of us.

7. Today is a wonderful reminder of the simple truth that there's no way out. The world continues to whisper: *Get all you can. Trample on others in the process. Hold something in your heart other than God.* But none of it will get you anywhere. You are trapped. Undone. Buried under all the things to which you cling. Well, good news: Jesus does his best work with those who are dead and buried. There's nothing you can do to inherit the Kingdom. You might as

well drop dead. Seriously. Because then God can raise you. Your possessions lose possession of you. The Spirit reclaims God's rightful spot in your heart. And you, alive for the first time, can live like you were meant to live. Not with selfish idolatry, but as a resurrected child of the Kingdom of God. You couldn't do it on your own, and you never needed to anyway. Let it go. Cling to Christ. Hold loosely everything that is not Christ. Release it for the sake of your neighbor as we anticipate the great upside-downing that is the Kingdom of God. Check your best intentions at the door; stop asking what you need to do and look to Christ who has done everything for you. Come on in. You made it; you're here! And you didn't even have to do a thing. Enjoy being last as you live your life putting others before yourself. Just as Jesus does for you. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.