

TEXT: Mark 10:17-31

TOPIC: A young man asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life; Jesus tells him what he can't do.

SUBJECT:

TITLE: One Thing

Several years ago, I was asked by a member of one of the churches I was serving at the time to go and visit a neighbor, who was in the hospital. The neighbor, however, had never attended church, but I went and visited her anyway.

I don't remember her name because I only visited with her that one time, but I will never forget the conversation we had. She gave me no indication she was as near death as she was, but she died before I could visit her again. What she asked me that day still confounds me.

"Do I have to sell everything I have and give it to the church?"

I guess that was her "one thing."

Her question that day was based on today's gospel reading, where a rich, young man approaches Jesus and kneels at his feet to ask what (he) – the rich young man – had to do to inherit eternal life, but as Jesus says it's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for those who let a distorted sense of their own importance seize the day.

Throughout the dialogue between this rich young man and Jesus are three subtle nuances to a dilemma the rich young man didn't know he faced.

First, he kneels before Jesus to ask his question. In Jesus' time it was shameful and dishonorable to seek a higher status than what you were born into. The rich young man was born into wealth; Jesus was born into abject poverty, so Jesus was not the rich young man's superior.

Next, the rich young man calls Jesus "good," so Jesus' response is one of humility and wisdom. Asking the man "why do you call me good" when no one but God is good points to the

misplaced priorities of this young man, who would have believed good was whatever he made it out to be.

Then, the rich young man asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” And that’s the thing. Receiving eternal life isn’t about doing anything, and it isn’t about inheriting anything; that’s what God did in Jesus. By asking what he had to do to inherit eternal life implied an expectation on the young man’s part because he had a distorted sense of his own importance. Even though the crowds probably chuckled at him when he said he’d kept all the commandments since childhood, Jesus looked upon this rich young man with love before telling him there was only one thing holding him back.

One of the hardest things I think anyone has to do is unburden themselves of whatever keeps them from fully relying on God. For some, it’s wealth, but for some it might not be. And I’m pretty sure if we told Jesus, “Lord, I’m poor in spirit” that wouldn’t cut it either. It’s the distortions people have which compromises their emotional and spiritual condition.

That’s what I attempted to explain to the woman I visited in the hospital that day all those years ago. I got the impression she thought she had to give all her belongings and money to the church in order to have eternal life even though she never stepped foot in the church. What I don’t think she understood is that people heal and experience salvation on God’s terms, not their terms. And God’s terms always involve qualities like grace, mercy, and love which are far superior to whatever terms we might think there need to be.

The gift of healing and salvation do something else, as well. Healing and salvation give people the agency to be their true selves.

The healing and salvation God provides makes it so people may love one another, love themselves, and love God.

Healing and salvation from God give people the necessary vulnerability, strength, and courage to share the good news.

Is it any wonder, then, why Jesus looked at the rich young man the way he did? Jesus looks at the rich young man hard in the eye and loves him. Jesus knew this rich young man was asking a sincere question.

“Young man, there is one thing you have to do,” Jesus tells the rich, young man. For the rich young man, giving away all his wealth and giving the proceeds to the poor was too much. Jesus was asking him to do more than he could do. The one thing Jesus said the young man had to do was give up everything that was possessing him.

Jesus looks us in the eye and loves us, too, when Jesus looks at us and says there is “one thing you have to do.”

Which leaves us with the question: Are you willing to give up everything that possesses you? If so, why don't you?

I think the reason I've never answered those questions for myself is because they require that I take a harder look at myself than I'm willing to take. I'm comfortable with things I have. I'm familiar with how my thought processes aren't always accurate; they're my thoughts. I'm acquainted with the status quo. I'm used to the quid pro quo. Maybe I don't answer the question because I've conditioned myself to avoid things that make me uncomfortable. Maybe Jesus' “one thing” response to the rich young man represented doing what made him uncomfortable. Maybe Jesus' “one thing” response to us is said for the same reason.

I'm not alone, am I?

You see, any one of us can be the rich young man who approaches Jesus, and Jesus may well look us in the eye and see the sincerity in our request and look on us with all the love there is and say to us, "there is one thing you lack."

Is the one thing you lack a desperate need for control?

Is the one thing you lack impatience?

Is the one thing you lack the healing you need to bless you?

Is the one thing you lack the limitations you tell yourself?

Is the one thing you lack your unwillingness to do what you know must be done?

Is the one thing you lack your resistance to change when changing is the only option?

Is the one thing you lack fear of others?

Maybe we know what it is and maybe we don't. But whatever the one thing is, I think a key message here is that it's a good idea to figure out whatever it is because I guarantee you, whatever that one thing is, once you let God free you of it, everything changes. Everything.

In the name of the triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – one God in perfect community. Amen.