

All Things Are Possible  
Rev. Nicole Farley  
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha  
October 14, 2012

**Hebrews 4:12-16**

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

<sup>13</sup> And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

<sup>14</sup> Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. <sup>15</sup> For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. <sup>16</sup> Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

**Mark 10:17-31**

<sup>17</sup> 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?’ <sup>18</sup> Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. <sup>19</sup> 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.”’ <sup>20</sup> He said to him, ‘Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.’ <sup>21</sup> 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.’ <sup>22</sup> When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

<sup>23</sup> 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!’ <sup>24</sup> 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! <sup>25</sup> 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.’ <sup>26</sup> They were greatly astounded and said to one another, ‘Then who can be saved?’ <sup>27</sup> Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’

<sup>28</sup> Peter began to say to him, ‘Look, we have left everything and followed you.’ <sup>29</sup> 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, <sup>30</sup> 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. <sup>31</sup> But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.’

“Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.” This passage has always, in some way, reminded me of the song *Santa Claus Is Coming to Town*. “You better watch out; you better not cry; you better not pout; I’m telling you why: Santa Claus is coming to town. He sees you when you’re sleeping; he knows when you’re awake; he knows when you’ve been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake.” We can’t fool Santa and we can’t fool God. The word of God knows – we cannot hide nor bluff through our weaknesses without being

found out.

For the man in our reading from Mark, his weakness is described as his wealth. If your weakness is not wealth, then there is something else, something else you rely on instead of God. What consumes your time, your thoughts, which might otherwise be spent on God? What excuses might you offer that God sees right through? The letter to the Hebrews begins by stating what God sees through by the power of God's word. It then continues by guiding us to the words we can speak, in which God will find truth. John P. Burgess writes, "these verses [are placed] together, inviting us to wrestle with the theological tension between God's word to us and our words to God, between God's judgment that lays us bare and God's grace that empowers us to ask help of God in our time of need, and between God's claim on us and our claim on God by virtue of Christ's saving work."<sup>1</sup> That's to say there is always a tension between whom we are created to be and who we are, between what God hopes for us and what we actually do, between God's judgment and God's grace.

These are **some** of the "both / and's" of our lives. We are both created for good and we are the people who make snarky and snide comments and think hateful thoughts. We are both people of great potential and people who don't live up to our potential. God's love is shown in both God's judgment and God's grace. Burgess describes it this way: "God's judgment is gracious, and God's grace is judging."<sup>2</sup>

We tend to think of judgment as the absence of grace and grace the absence of judgment but, really, they are delicately intertwined for God. God judges what we do and, in God's grace, God loves us still. And God's grace does not let us off the hook, for that would give us no reason to try to grow. Thus, judgment comes with grace. For us to receive grace, God must first acknowledge, first judge, the reasons grace is to be given.

Jesus came, in part, that we might believe that God understands us and what we go through and what causes us to struggle and fail and then try again to be better. This is indeed good news! Susan R. Andrews explains this way: "The Lord meets us in the places of temptation and weakness, experiencing all the human foibles that separate us from God."<sup>3</sup> It is this same Jesus who encounters the rich man. And not only does he encounter him, we read that he looks at him. Not just a glance to acknowledge that he knows he is there, no. Jesus looks at him, looks into his eyes, recognizes God's created within him and, in so doing, loves him. Jesus hears the man's question and hears within it that which keeps him from eternal life with God. Certainly his wealth is part of the problem; as I mentioned earlier, his focus on his wealth left him less time to focus on God.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*, p. 158.

<sup>2</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*, p. 160.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

I've said before that the gospel, the words and actions of Jesus Christ, are meant to be scandalous. The scandal of this passage has been lessened over time and from one culture to another so allow me to reintroduce it. Judaism, as well as the Greek (Hellenistic) and Roman cultures in which the Jews lived, believed that wealth was a sure sign of God's approval. Those who behaved well in God's sight were blessed, and riches and other goodneses were showered upon them. With few exceptions, this theme is consistent throughout the Hebrew Bible. Those listening would have had their understanding of God's favor turned upside-down as Jesus said, "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." Again, it's not so much the wealth that is at issue but the presence of something that distracts one from the Presence, capital P Presence, of God.

We find a hint to the man's greatest weakness by the fifth word of his query. "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Me. How can *I* control my relationship with God? I've been reading *An Altar in the World* by Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and professor, and she frames this weakness in this way: "According to the classical philosopher Paul Woodruff, reverence is the virtue that keeps people from trying to act like gods. 'To forget that you are only human,' he says, 'to think that you can act like a god – this is the opposite of reverence.'"<sup>4</sup> In contrast, she also recollects the story of Jacob and the famous ladder of his dreams. When he awoke from his dream of angels ascending to and descending from heaven, he said, "Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!" Jacob was reverent. Taylor writes, "The vision showed Jacob something he did not know. He slept in the House of God. He woke at the gate of heaven. None of this was his doing. The only thing he did right was to see where he was and say so."<sup>5</sup>

The man with wealth was so focused on what he was doing that he was not watching for what God was doing. And what God can do is so far beyond what we are able to do. C. Clifton Black writes, "What is humanly impossible remains divinely achievable. In fact, this way of putting things returns the reader to the form in which the man originally framed his question: 'What must *I* do?' Ultimately, salvation cannot lie in mortal hands. It resides only with God, without whose support the human will cannot achieve its deepest desires."<sup>6</sup>

Getting close to God is not about what we can do. James J. Thompson wisely writes, "Even honestly acquired and generously shared wealth is dangerous to our salvation, because it prompts us to rely on ourselves rather than God...Even honestly sought virtue and faith are dangerous, because they also prompt us to rely on ourselves rather than God. We are saved only when we stop worrying about

---

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*, p. 167.

our salvation and turn our attention to God and neighbor.”<sup>7</sup>

When did Jacob find himself closest to God? When God came to him. This doesn’t mean we should go about our normal routine and just wait for God to show up in our lives. That’s not how Jacob did it. Jacob found God because he was willing to acknowledge God. Jacob didn’t shake his head and say, “Wow, that was a weird dream” and go on his way. Jacob was willing to allow that God was there in that unexpected place and he took the time to really *look* at the place where he was. We cannot force an encounter with God but we can absolutely be attentive for when God encounters us, when God looks at us, and our neighbors, and sees God’s created ones with love. Barbara Brown Taylor says, “Reverence requires a certain pace. It requires a willingness to take detours, even side trips, which are not part of the original plan.”<sup>8</sup> To reverence, I would add encounters with God, which also require a willingness to take detours, even side trips, which are not part of the plan.

The wealthy man’s plan was to accumulate and then Jesus says, “You lack one thing.” He must have been thinking, “Great, tell me what it is. I’m sure I can acquire it just like I’ve acquired everything else.” And Jesus continues, “go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.” The “thing” the man was lacking was freedom: the freedom of space for God, the freedom of time for God, the freedom of flexibility to take detours for, and with, God, the freedom from possessions and money which occupied his time, the freedom from a sense of control, allowing *God* to make impossible things possible. What is it that distracts *you*? Where can you make room for *God* to make impossible things possible?

Let us pray: God of possibility, help us to free ourselves, give up those things, so we can look for you as you seek us out. Amen.

---

<sup>7</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*, p. 168.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), p. 24.