

Please be seated.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” the man asked Jesus. Jesus’s first answer is that he must keep the commandments, and lists off six of the ten. “Teacher,” he replies, “I have kept all these since my youth.” The Gospeler then tells us that, in response to this earnest reply, Jesus “looked at him and loved him.”

I cannot think of a sentence in the whole of scripture that moves me more than this. We are told in many places that God loves us, that God is love, but that’s rather too abstract and too generic to give me much comfort. In this instance, however, it is immediate and intensely personal: “Jesus, looking at him, loved him.” I think we can all place ourselves in this man’s shoes. We have all been, at one time or another, earnest about something that, at the moment, seems the most important thing to us – something that is of ultimate concern. And we have sought to learn as much as we could about it, to think deeply about it, to try to understand it. Clearly this man was in such a place, and sought counsel from someone he considered wise, a teacher. And this teacher, sensing his earnestness, loves him.

I’ve been in Jesus’s shoes many times as well. As a choir director, I have often looked at the choir I am directing, and seen the earnest desire on their faces to convey and therefore share with the listener the beauty that they have found in the music. And I have loved them. Recently a member of the choir said to me, with grave self-doubt, that he hoped he was not dragging down the efforts of everyone else, and that doubtless I was aware of his shortcomings. I looked at him, and loved him for his earnestness.

I don’t think that I could want anything more from God than to know that, when I am seen, truly seen, even with all my imperfections, that I am loved. Not generically, as God loves everyone he has created; nor

even dutifully, like God is supposed to love me; but personally, *me*, this particular amalgam of sinew and bone, thought and desire, aspiration and doubt, altruism and selfishness. I want to think that Jesus could look at me, into my eyes, and see all of it, and love me, like a best friend, or a spouse, or a lover, or a soulmate, or like a teacher for his best pupil. And this sentence in Mark – the earliest and therefore perhaps the rawest of the Gospels – gives me a glimpse into an instance where Jesus’s heart suddenly went out to *an individual*. It’s a moment when Jesus ceases being the philosopher, the wisdom teacher, the guru, and suddenly becomes human himself, and feels his emotions stirred by an individual into whose eyes he has looked, and whose heart he has understood in its complex entirety. This is a moment of wonder for me, of revelation, and even of reassurance.

What happens next is more difficult. Having seen into his heart, and loving what he found, Jesus identifies this man’s greatest obstacle, his greatest barrier to that which he seeks. This particular man’s impediment is his attachment to his possessions.

What might it be for me, I wonder? As a 3 on the Enneagram Personality Inventory, perhaps it would be my overwhelming need for affirmation. Perhaps Jesus would have said to me, “You lack one thing: you must work in complete anonymity, and never receive any praise or recognition, be misinterpreted and misunderstood, mistakenly – or even rightly – reviled for who you are, and then eventually forgotten by all. Then you will have earned eternal life.”

Shocked by this glimpse of my greatest fear, I go away grieving. And then, adding insult to injury, Jesus turns to his disciples and says “How hard it will be for those who desire affirmation to enter the kingdom of God – as difficult as a camel going through the eye of a needle.”

Lost, then. I’m lost. There is no way that I can earn eternal life.

Perhaps the other reading we heard today might offer us more hope. Let's see, in the Epistle to the Hebrews we read that "God is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. Before him no creature is hidden, but naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account."

Hmm. It's not looking good.

But then there is a ray of hope -- "we do not have a God who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are." This refers to Jesus, I presume, having become human, having been placed in my shoes, and subjected to the same weaknesses that I have. Perhaps this, then, is what Jesus sees in the eyes of the rich man -- not his earnestness, but his weakness -- and, seeing this, he loves him, because Jesus himself has also struggled with the same love of ease and freedom from pain, the same desire for possessing. He knows that he will shortly be subjected to pain and torture, and, aware that he has the power to avoid it, will even go so far as to ask God to "take this cup away from me" -- to remove the obstacle, the painful hardship. He, too, knows what it is to be tempted by release from pain, and to go away grieving when he finds that he cannot get to where he needs to go without going through it.

This identification with our weaknesses is part of the love that I think Jesus has for each of us, and that we most crave in our relationship with the Divine. In fact, the next sentence in Hebrews is this: "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."

In essence, then, perhaps this is the conclusion to draw: The rich man asks the wrong question -- "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" -- implying that he can earn it somehow through his actions. Jesus answers "You can't. It's impossible. You cannot *earn* eternal life, even

by keeping as many commandments as you can. In fact, because I empathize with the obstacles that prevent you from *earning* eternal life, you must approach the throne of grace with boldness. You can't earn it; it is a grace, a help in time of need, a gift, freely bestowed, because I know you, including your weaknesses, and **therefore** I love you."