

## ***“Anything But That”***

*Mark 10:17-31*

New Revised Standard Version

*\*This manuscript is an interpretation of the sermonic moment. Use it as a guide for the sermon direction; because of time, not everything you read printed here is actually included in the spoken sermon.*

Welcome to Lent. ‘Tis the season for hard stuff. Buckle up. It’s going to be a Rocky Road. (And not nearly as sweet as the ice cream!)

Following Jesus sounds nice until we look at his life. I don’t know about you but his life looks pretty different than mine. All the things in our lives that give us meaning are not the same things that Jesus focuses on. We focus on our families and Jesus’ asks “Who is my mother? Who is my brother?” We focus on getting an education and getting a job and creating stability in our lives so that we can buy a house, but Jesus was a nomad. Often times, as loving as he is, Jesus doesn’t seem like a man with a plan. At all. And we like our plans, don’t we?

It’s not like he’s gathering his disciples around him every morning saying, “Okay, we’re going to this home to heal this person, then we’ll cast out

demons from a couple of people at this intersection, then we’ll head out to sea for a boat ride, and it looks cloud so there will probably be a storm we have to calm, and then pretty much the whole afternoon will be spent trying to figure out how to feed 5,000 or so people. Okay? Okay. Be on your donkey in 15 minutes ready to go!

I mean, that sounds like a full day, a hard day even, but if you knew what was coming you could at least prepare yourself. Wear your sneakers for walking, bring the hand sanitizer for all that healing stuff, the raincoat for the stormy boat ride, and yeah, should probably throw in some extra snacks if we’re gonna have to feed all those people. But the disciples don’t get an itinerary from Jesus each day. And neither do we, do we?

We never really know what the next moment will bring with

him, or what hard truth we'll have to grasp.

As we make our way through Mark's Gospel, does it ever strike you as odd that *this* is the man that we follow? He's kind of scattered. Not super clear all the time. He gets distracted easily. I mean, it's no wonder that books like Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* or Stephen Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* or Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* are so popular. I get it. They give tangible steps to success. An outline for achievement. For growth. And sure, it's not necessarily easy stuff - or we'd all be doing it - but at least it's a plan...a road map...a list of things that we can check off (done that - check; done that - check; need to work on that - circle; getting better at that - star, etc.)

But we have no checklist with Jesus. We have his teachings and his actions. And ultimately, following Jesus means *listening to him*, as the voice of God reminded Peter (and us) last week during the Transfiguration. And this is why we need Lent. We need a

season where we tune out all the other voices and listen to Jesus is saying to us today. And I don't know about you, but I need it to be this bounded set of time, this 40 days, because I can't take much more than that, can you?

40 days out of 365 days (or 366 as the case may be - happy leap year, by the way), is just 9.15%. The Israelites had 40 days wandering in the wilderness. Jesus had 40 days tempted, alone in the desert. We have 40 days of Lent. Just under 10% of a year. That's what God knew we could handle in terms of hard-core discipleship. Not bad. It's like a tithe, isn't it? God directed the Israelites to give a tenth of their crops back to God and neighbor, and God asks us to give about a tenth of our year to true discipline in our faith.

We follow a man who walked the walk and talked the talk 365 days a year, but we as Christians have given ourselves these 40 days of Lent to really try our hand at it. One tenth of our year.

And we are earnest about it, aren't we? Well-intentioned.

Hopeful. Our hearts are in the right place. We are ready to sacrifice something...to push ourselves.

Just like the man in today's text. He's a good man; he cares about his faith. Not only does he care enough to ask Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, we also find out that he has been adhering to a good chunk of the 10 commandments - his whole life! He hasn't killed anyone. He hasn't cheated on his spouse. He hasn't robbed a bank, or even shoplifted from a dollar store. He hasn't lied (unless, of course, he's fibbing right now saying he's never lied...but we're giving him the benefit of the doubt here!). He hasn't cheated anyone. He hasn't talked back to his parents. He's done all these things - *since his youth*! This is a good man. This guy has it together. I don't know about you, but this guy has it together more than I do! He has his list, and he's checked all the boxes, and he just wants to make sure he's on the right path.

Mark tells us in verse 21 that Jesus looks at this man and loves him. I think that Jesus

loves him because that's what Jesus does; Jesus loves people. But I also wonder if Jesus loves him because he was trying really hard. He was "all in;" he was earnest. I also wonder if Jesus loves him because he knew that what he was about to tell the man would bring him to his knees in grief...and Jesus tends to go into "love over-drive" when he sees someone hurting. We don't know where the love comes from, but Mark tells us that Jesus loves this man. And this is key. This is the basis for our discipleship: Jesus' love for us. First and foremost.

And I think this exchange tells us that Jesus loves all of our efforts of discipleship, even when we miss the mark. Jesus loves that we try. At least this guy isn't lukewarm, right! Again - he is "all in."

And yet, there is *one* thing. Jesus sees the one thing that this man doesn't see, and that (Lord knows) we don't see either. That we love our stuff. Too much. That we get our power in life from what we possess. Oh sure, we say we don't. But we do. We say that our stuff doesn't matter, but it

does. We know it does. It makes us feel safe and secure. It makes us feel provided for. It makes us feel like we have the power to provide for others, to help others. It gives us the roof over our head that we need to rest so that we can be good Christians and help and serve others. Money reminds us we are educated and responsible. That we work hard and can keep a job. That we don't depend on others; that we are self-sufficient, self-sustaining. We aren't a burden to others or to society. But the truth is - in our society - making money = having worth.

Money makes us feel worthy. It also makes us feel good and safe. And beyond the basics of food, shelter, and safety... Who doesn't love a new pair of red heels? Or a new set of golf clubs? Or a nice meal out? Or a cruise to some cool place in the world? Most of us love these things. And we work hard for them. And money is what gives these things to us.

And when we don't have these things...when we don't have money, we feel bad, we feel like we're not pulling our weight, we feel like a burden,

we feel jealous of others. Money has real power over our lives and our hearts.

So yes, Jesus knows what this man must do and what this man needs, because Jesus knows what we all need and what we all must do. Release our grip on money. On our stuff. And - more deeply - on our obsession with independence and self-reliance.

So Jesus tells the man that he needs to sell all his stuff and give the money to the poor but then - as if that's not enough - he has to come back and start following Jesus around!

Do you see what Jesus is doing here? (Besides making all of us uncomfortable.) He's turning the man's question on its head. The man asked what HE himself needed to do to inherit eternal life. He was concerned about himself, not others; he was concerned about getting into heaven, not living well on earth. And the answer Jesus gave him had nothing to do with himself...it was all about putting *other people* first. Jesus didn't just say get rid of your stuff. Jesus told him to give the

money he made from selling his possessions to the poor.

He puts this man in relationship with, in community with, the poor around him. Perhaps opening his eyes to people he had not seen before, needs he had not known were there. Or maybe needs that he knew good and well were there, but he didn't think it was his job to help with those needs or those people. Then after telling the man to do this, it's not like Jesus leaves him hanging to be out on his own and living on the streets by himself. No. He says, *"sell your stuff, give the money to the poor, come back to me, and follow me - hang out with me, live your life with me."* Almost as if to day - *"I've got you; we're in this together. When you've rid yourself of all the stuff that's keeping you tied down to your current way to living, come live with me - and we'll live together. I'll teach you a new way of seeing, of being, of living. Sure money will be a part of it, because it's a part of life, but your security and identity won't come from money...your security and identity will come from hanging out with me."*

Jesus doesn't ask the man to sell all his stuff and give to the poor just so that the man can become poor himself. Jesus asks the man to completely re-orient his life. Jesus asks the man to focus on those commandments that have to do with having a relationship with God, with not putting any other priority between himself and God...of loving God so much that to everyone you're your love of God simply looks like loving others...which is what true discipleship does.

But what does the man to? He is shocked, Mark tells us. He didn't see this coming. And he's grieved. He walks away thinking, *"Anything but that."* Anything but my stuff. It's *my* stuff. And I do good things with it! I'm a good man! Yes, and yes, says Jesus. And - give it away. You are attached to it. And the money you can get for your pretty things is money that other people to live and to eat. Share all that you have accumulated and produced and made for yourself with others, and hit the re-set button with me. Let me show you how to truly live in service to God and

to others. And how to depend on God and others.

Now we don't know what happened to the man after he went home grieved. Maybe he thought about it and made the hard decision and came back to Jesus having done what he asked him to do. Mark never circles back on this story, so we don't know. Maybe Jesus' response made the man think long and hard about all his stuff and maybe the man did do some Marie Kondo-ing around his house and maybe he did sell some stuff and give the money to the poor. Maybe he did figure out how to live more simply, and maybe it changed his outlook on his relationship to neighbor and his responsibility to the poor in his village. We don't know. Maybe he just felt sad and grieved and maybe this was the breaking point where he felt like - well, if that's what it takes then it's just not for me. Maybe faith isn't worth it. Like, *"I did all these things on the "God-list" and I've been such a good guy my whole life - and if this isn't enough, then screw it. I deserve my stuff. I earned my stuff. I've never taken anything from*

*anyone else. So what's the big deal?"*

Well that. Precisely that. He's never taken anything from anyone else. He's been completely independent. Have you ever thought about dependence as a part of discipleship? Think about it, Jesus asks people to leave their homes, their careers, and their stuff to follow him. All that made them independent. And it's not that he makes them dependent on just him. He teaches them how to be dependent on one another. On how to look at what's in the community to feed everyone - we have 5 loaves and 2 fishes? Okay, we can make that work. What's in your lunch bag? What can you share?

Jesus celebrates the faith of the friends who lower their paralyzed friend down through a roof. He sees *their* faith and the man is healed and his sins forgiven because he lets himself be lowered down by friends.

Jesus invites people not to just feast on him and his life, but shows them at a basic meal how to remember him - by

breaking bread and blessing wine - and teaches them that they are to do this *together*. He washes the disciples feet - showing them a lesson of service and servitude, of humility. A practice that will help smooth out the rough edges of their pride. Sure they could all wash their own feet. But what do we learn when we do that? We just become critical of our feet - thinking how stubby our toes are, how wrinkly our skin is, how calloused our heels are, how yellow our toenails are. By washing someone else's feet our attention is directed to them. And we are far more compassionate with others! We see their sores and callouses with compassion, not criticism. We are pushed out of our comfort zones. For five minutes we stop obsessing about our body and our lives and we do something that feels vulnerable.

Time and time again, this is what Jesus does. He teaches us to see one another. To live in community. To need one another. **And to want to need one another.** To stop thinking we can do this on our own.

And today's text is no exception.

The disciples are shocked to hear Jesus talk about how hard it will be for rich people to enter the kin-dom of God. (Remember their context: being rich = being blessed by God.) So Jesus turns the question of "eternal life" to a question about entering the "kin-dom of God". And we know that the kin-dom of God is about what we do IN THIS LIFE, not about the LIFE HEREAFTER. This is why we pray each week, "*thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" Jesus is telling his disciples that those who have wealth - of any kind - are going to struggle with participating in the kin-dom of God. And I think he means - here on earth. Precisely because wealth keeps us separate from people.

The most tangible example I can think of when it comes to this is when I lived in Boston. I didn't have a car; I rode public transportation everywhere, which forces you to interact with people. You can't just roll up your window and not make eye contact with the man experiencing homelessness. You are rubbing elbows with

him on the subway. You are waiting beside him for 10 minutes for the bus. All the smells and the sounds of being in and around people...it's all there with public transportation.

And so is all the beauty. The unexpected conversations that come when the person next to you is reading a book you just read. The joy of hearing the subway musician jam out. The beauty of seeing someone's eyes up close and realizing they are glistening with joy as they receive good news on the other end of their cell phone. All the outfits - the business suits and the scrubs and the athletic uniforms and the police uniforms and the half awake students and the fast food workers...all the badges and ID cards swinging from people's belt loops and necklaces. You see what people do for a living. You see people living.

We don't see this in our cars as we drive around. Sure we see it for a moment in the grocery store - but it's not the same as seeing it for 45 minutes as it bumps into you over and over again on the subway.

The point being - wealth has a way of isolating us. It just does. Living in a house lessens your interaction with those around you - even when you're a really good neighbor. It's not the same as an apartment complex or even condo where you ride the elevator with folks, or step around people sitting on the stoop.

And I think *this* is why Jesus tells the man in this story, and the disciples, that entering the kin-dom of God is harder for people with a lot of money. Because money helps us isolate and it makes living in community harder. It makes it harder to learn to depend on one another. We start to believe more and more in the illusion of self-sufficiency when we make more and more money. It gets really comfortable and really nice. Especially for introverts like me. People? Who need 'em? We don't even have to go to the store to buy our own groceries - there's an app for that; we can avoid the lines and the people and it just shows up at our door!

The disciples, like us, are distressed by the fact that it's going to be harder for the rich



to enter the kin-dom of God. But they are still not quite understanding Jesus because they say, *“but who can be saved then?”* They go back to the concern about eternal life. Jesus looks at them, just as he looked at the man, and he gives a very loving, reassuring response: *“For mortals it is impossible; but not for God, for God all things are possible,”* (v 27).

Almost as if to say, *“All things are possible for God when it comes to eternal life. This is what grace is. God can draw any and all people to Godself.”* Jesus assures them that this thing about being wealthy - is not really about eternal life - it's about how we live in the here and now. And so he assuages their fears saying, *“Look, God can do anything - that's what I'm here to teach you...it's not about earning God's love....it's about receiving the love God has so freely given us.”* This is the gospel good news, right? For all of us - rich or poor.

With God all things are possible. We have hope. Because God gives us that

hope. Not because we earn it on our own. Which is the point.

As we begin Lent, our Journey of Sabbath moments, it is good for us to remember that Sabbath has its roots in the stopping of production under Pharaoh. It was so that slaves could have a day of rest where they were just “being” and not “producing.” We have lost this notion in today's society. Our markets are crashing right now because of coronavirus, because of the fear (and the reality) that production will stop or slow and the chain of events that leads to all of us making money is being interrupted. What happens when we stop producing? We stop making money, and we stop spending money.

Did you know that the roots of Sabbath were to create a weekly moment where those very things happen? Where the exchange of money ceased? Where labor ceased? We've created a market now where we can't handle the stoppage of production. Recessions come and go. Markets dip and rise. But we freak out whenever we start losing money and losing our ability to make money and

our ability to spend money and we start fearing for our future. Because we've created a whole society dependent on this.

It is the world we live in. It's not really a matter of whether you like that or don't like that. It is what it is. It is the world we live in. And yet - Jesus tells the man to sell all his stuff and give his money to the poor and come and follow him. And - he's grieved. Because he doesn't think he can do it. It feels impossible. *Anything but that*, he thinks. I'll do anything but that. I'll even give away half of my stuff - but all of it? Nope, can't do it.

And honestly, we always give the man a hard time thinking that he's grieved because he doesn't want to give away his possessions, but maybe the part that grieves him is that he has to come back; he has to leave home and follow Jesus. Maybe that is the tough part. Honestly, to me, it *all* sounds tough.

I have not done it. I have not sold my possessions and given the money to the poor.

And sure, we have an irresistible urge to soften this passage's demands. That urge has been around a long time.

For example an ancient scribe added words to make 10:24 read "how hard it is *for those who trust in riches* to enter the kingdom of God" (see the King James Version), as if the problem highlighted by the rich man is not being rich but putting faith in the wealth a person has or craves. This solution ignores the overall thrust of 10:23-25, where Jesus speaks quite plainly about the real obstacle that wealth presents.<sup>1</sup>

A ninth-century interpreter made up the idea of a low gate into Jerusalem called "the eye of the needle," through which camels could pass only if they stooped and were unladen with the burdens of all the stuff they were carrying. Presumably, then, Jesus criticizes only the proud rich who won't offload some of their stuff, or only the rich who are not extremely determined to enter the

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Skinner, "Commentary on Mark 10:17-31," *Working Preacher* (11 Oct. 2009), accessed on Mar. 1, 2020 at

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=402](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=402).

kingdom. Unfortunately, no such gate ever existed - this “eye of the needle” gate is not a real thing!<sup>2</sup>

And, of course, countless preachers have told us Jesus omnisciently perceived that wealth was this particular man's special "weak spot," and so he zeroed in on it only to expose the man's distinctive shortcoming. This gives us permission to assume that Jesus would not ask us to part with our possessions, just those things that we *really* do not want to give up--only our aggressive driving or fried foods, for example.<sup>3</sup>

And then some say that the word for camel (*kamelon* in Greek) got confused for the word for rope (*kamilon* in Aramaic).<sup>4</sup> And it would make a lot more sense to use the metaphor of a rope going through the eye of a needle. The words are one letter difference. Either way - the metaphor stands...you can't put a thick rope through the eye of a needle that is normally used

for thread nor could a camel go through such a thing either.

We are not alone in trying to make this passage say something other than what it says.

“In the end, this story is untamable. That is, like a parable, it resists simple explanations and it denies loopholes, making us so uncomfortable that we are liable to talk circles around it in hope of stumbling upon a basis for softening its message.”<sup>5</sup>

This story, again like a parable, intends to be experienced rather than explained--experienced in a way that keeps us focused on the real-life demands of discipleship, on the seriousness of the new community envisioned by the kingdom of God, and on the foundational promise that *God* makes salvation possible. Not us. This story is supposed to make us uncomfortable. It asks us, “*What is OUR ‘anything but that?’*”

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<sup>2</sup> Skinner, *ibid*.

<sup>3</sup> Skinner, *ibid*.

<sup>4</sup> Brad Miner, “Camel or Rope?” *The Catholic Thing* (4 Jan. 2010), accessed on Mar. 1, 2020 at

<https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2010/01/04/camel-or-rope/>.

<sup>5</sup> Skinner, *ibid*.

We all want the easier answers of discipleship. Sure, I can pray more, go to worship more, read the Bible more, give more money...I can do “more, more, more” - just tell me what to do! What we struggle with (and what Jesus is teaching us here) is the “less” part. The stripping down. The eliminating. The giving away. The loosening our grip on life part. You know...all the parts that actually make us dependent on God and one another, rather than just ourselves. But *that* is what the kin-dom of God is all about. It’s what helps us learn why and how to love God and love our neighbor in actual, real time.

We all have an “anything but that” thing when it comes to our faith. It might not be money for you. You may be okay with getting rid of stuff. But maybe you don’t want to move away from family. Or accept that a family member is moving away because he or she is following a call on their life.

Or maybe your “anything but that” is related to speaking out for justice for one who is oppressed; because you don’t

want to offend or put yourself in a compromising position.

Maybe your “anything but that” is leadership or using your gifts or volunteering for some way of serving others. Because you are protective of your time. You’ll give money, you’ll come to worship, but you can’t commit to help or serve in any kind of a long-term way because you need to guard your time, you aren’t sure what is coming down the road for you, and serving in that way may keep you from pursuing a new job or maybe you think you’ll let people down because you don’t have the gifts or time.

Maybe your “anything but that” is letting God hold your love done. You are a caregiver and you are doing all you can and you are following Jesus the best way you know how...but you just can’t let your loved one go...you can’t release them into God’s arms...because it means releasing control, and dealing with grief and anger and sadness and frustration, and all those things that illness and death and loss of identity and control bring up for us.

**What is your “anything but that?” when it comes to following Jesus?** The thing you’re just not ready to do or that feels like it’s asking just too much from you? Where do you draw the line? If you don’t know, a great way to figure this out is to ask: Where do you hang on? Where do you see yourself getting defensive? What are the passages in scripture where you find yourself resisting what is being said? Where you try to argue or rationalize your way out of hearing what the text says because it means you would have to change your life, so you’d rather change your interpretation/understanding of scripture? Or maybe it’s more subtle than that, you just choose to focus on other passages and not grapple with the ones that challenge you. Where do you feel yourself resistant to a message in a sermon? By me or anyone else? Where do you see yourself criticizing others - perhaps others who are more conservative than you or more liberal than you? Or people who practice their faith in a different way or worship in a different style? All of these points of resistance in us reveal to us that we are insecure about

something or afraid of something...and I think it can help us answer the “*anything but that*” dimension of our own discipleship.

Just like the man in the text, we can look at all that we are doing to be good people and to follow Jesus and we can focus on that. But every now and again we need to look at what we are NOT doing, right? Maybe about 10% of the time we should do that. Lent is that season. Now is the time. What do we need to let go of? How much deeper is God calling us to go? What are we holding on to so tightly that letting go of it just seems unreasonable and unattainable? What would grieve you if you lost it?

Could it be that the very area in your life where feel fear and resistance is the very area where God is waiting to unlock a whole new experience of faith for you?

What is your “*anything but that?*”

The good news is - while we have our “*anything but that*”’s when it comes to following Jesus, God does not have any

*“anyone but them”*’s when it comes to accepting us. This is grace = that all things are possible with God, all people are welcome in God’s kin-dom.

You can do whatever it is you feel Jesus is calling you to do because God believes you can and believes in you. And - while you struggle and resist and wait - while I sit with my possessions still and try to understand what Jesus is saying to me in this passage (do I really need to sell my stuff??) - God loves me anyway and always in all ways. And God loves you too. It all begins there. Discipleship begins with love. Remember what Mark tells us before Jesus gave the man the ultimate task of following him: Jesus, looking at him, loved him.

Jesus sees you. Jesus loves you. And that’s why Jesus calls you to do that thing that you just don’t want to do - your *“anything but that.”*

Maybe this Lent we can take one step further in the direction of saying YES to our *“anything but that”* by saying *“okay, maybe that”*...but show me

how, O God. Show me how that is possible?

I’m right here with you...with my eyes open...needing to be shown how...wanting to make change and yet not wanting to make the changes in my life that would help me change.

God help us all, right?

Good thing God does. God does help us. All things are possible with God. Thanks to be God! and Amen.