



Sermon: Love in the Gate

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15; Mark 10:17-31

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When I told a friend this week that this would be the passage I would preach this passage from Mark, she said, “I’ve always been confused by that passage. It seems to be of such a high standard that it is unattainable.” She continued, “It reminds me of the kind of diet where you win only if you consume only 700 calories a day. I am not the kind of girl who can eat only 700 calories a day, nor do I want to be. The goal is simply too high, and I cannot attain it—so why bother?”

Why bother? We hear from Jesus that the gateway to eternal life is about as open to the rich man in Mark’s gospel as the eye of a needle is for a camel. What a conundrum. No wonder the man with many possessions walked away grieving. Why bother?

Before we grapple with the question, “Why bother,” I ask first that we grapple with the question the rich man asked Jesus in the first place. I would dare question the question. I believe the question was an honest one, from the heart. But I want to question whether that is the question we need to worry about in our religious practice. You see, I would be so bold to say that **inheriting eternal life** is not a goal we should hope to achieve.

First of all, faith is not about stockpiling riches. Clearly the rich man, in the course of his life, has gathered more than plenty of material possessions. He has secured his station here on earth; now, his concern before Jesus is that he secure his station in heaven. I have always wondered about people whose primary motivation for Christian faith and practice is “heaven insurance.” It seems very self-motivated to me. Should not Christian faith and practice arise out of a desire to be in relationship with God and God’s people? If Christian discipleship is

based on a fear of hell, then is it truly following Christ? In my first year of seminary, I had the enjoyment of studying with the Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The architecture of apartheid certainly shaped the archbishop's view of the world. And yet, hear his perspective on heaven: "We may be surprised at who we find in heaven. God has a soft spot for sinners. His standards are quite low."

If we spend too much time worrying about who and how we get to heaven, we miss what our faith in Jesus can teach us about how to shape our lives in this world, and shape the world in which we live.

Second of all, the rich man's question screams of works righteousness. He approaches eternal life as if it is something he can earn-- not a gift that God will give him. Our Presbyterian heritage in particular emphasizes that any sort of afterlife is a gift from God, borne of grace— not borne of our worthiness. Heaven is not something we *earn* by checking all the right commandments off on a list. We are **heirs** to eternal life; we do not **earn** eternal life.

Why, then, do we seek to follow God's commandments? Why then do we work for justice at the gate? Why then do we seek goodness in **this** life? Jesus said "No one is good but God alone." So by seeking goodness, we seek God. This is why we bother: because we love God, and because God loves us, and because when you **love** someone you want to honor the subject of your love.

The prophet Amos invites us to look not at the gates that lead us to heaven, but the gates of justice in the here and now. Amos calls out to those at the gate. In Israel, the Gate was not just the entryway to the community. The Gate was just inside the main entry to the city, and it was a public space where people gathered to bring their grievances to be heard, where they fashioned their laws for life in the community, and where people went in search of compassion for their particular legal situations.

But in the gate, Amos laments Israel's tendency to "turn justice into wormwood... trample on the poor, take bribes, and push aside the needy in the gate." Perhaps we can see some parallels in the government in which we live. I am new here in Chicago, but I think I can remember a story about a politician or more with itchy palms. I came last from Jersey, so I am not naïve to government corruption and its costs.

Now, as I settle into my new home, I am trying to get to know the neighborhoods and my neighbors, and to see what goes on inside the gates of Chicagoland.

Fridays are my day off, and I like to always find some sort of adventure on Fridays. As long as the weather is dry, that adventure has typically involved biking to explore some part of Chicago I have not yet seen. A couple of weeks ago, I biked up to the Lincoln Park Zoo. I love the fact

that the zoo is free and accessible to all people, even if the animals are not in their ideal environments.

As I entered the zoo, I first walked through the exhibit of large cats. I saw lions, and cheetahs, and tigers. One tiger smelled the air as I walked past, a sign that she was noticing me as much as I was noticing her. When I passed the Afghan Leopard exhibit, I noticed a homeless woman standing at that animal's fence. She had a shopping cart full of her belongings, in addition to her multiple layers of clothes. I noticed her, but she did not notice me. She was too busy talking to the Afghan Leopard. She chatted with this leopard as if it were her own housecat. In fact, after I had circled through the zoo and was on my way out again, this woman still stood, staring into the cage, telling the leopard all the stories that were important to her that day.

On the one hand, I was appreciative of my new city; I was glad that I live in a city where there are beautiful spaces that are accessible to all. I felt grateful that green space, wildlife, and lake front are free and open to wealthy and poor alike, and that this woman had the whole city as her backyard, and a leopard as her house pet. I do not yet know the history of which city leaders decided that public spaces were a value they wanted to hold up for the city of Chicago, but I considered the fact that these spaces exist as a good stewardship of our city's money.

On the other hand, seeing this homeless woman caused me to feel remorse, as I often do, that homelessness persists as a problem in Chicago and in Oak Park—indeed, is on the rise—in a city that is blessed by so many resources. And the problem of homelessness is only getting worse: as city and state leaders grapple with a budget crisis, their response thus far has been to cut crucial programs, such as mental health intervention, homelessness prevention and affordable housing. The effect will ripple out years beyond the current budget crisis. We already see the impact of those cuts lining up at our church doors each week for shelter and for food.

I see homeless people every day, some of whom find temporary sanctuary in the walls of this church through PADS. I am glad to be in a church that works to address the immediate needs of homeless in our community. But I wonder what more we can do to address the problem of homelessness on a macro level.

The Chicago Coalition for the Homeless is part of a community organizing movement that proposes an added tax on services in Illinois. I learned—I had never noticed when I looked at the receipt—that things like dry cleaning, pedicures, tanning beds and lawn care are not taxed in Illinois. For the most part, these services are optional. I don't have a lawn and I'd rather skip the tanning beds, but I do regularly take my clothes for dry-cleaning, and I splurge on summer pedicures. I for one would be glad to have a tax added if I knew it would go to help house the homeless, intervene in youth drug use, and care for the mentally ill. State Senator Harmon

representing Oak Park supports such a measure, and he could use more support for the measure to gain momentum in the state legislature.

God calls us not as stewards of our own afterlife, but stewards of this life. When we see injustice at the gate, our faith tells us we must act. “If you are neutral in situations of injustice,” Archbishop Tutu sometimes said, “you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on a mouse and you say you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.”

What must I do to inherit eternal life? The rich man’s focus is on heaven. Jesus’ focus is on what he does on earth. Clearly the rich man cannot carry his wealth into heaven. Neither can we. So, instead of puzzling over how we can get a camel to fit through the eye of a needle, we need to puzzle over how drug use at Oak Park River Forest high school feeds the gang violence in neighboring Austin. Instead of worrying how we might individually achieve eternal life, we must collectively worry about how we might house families trying to stay alive in the here and now. Instead of questioning who can be saved, we must question the causes of injustice, asking these questions in the name of Christ.

These questions cause us to look at wealth in a whole different light.

In the 1800’s, there was once a pacifist who loved poetry.

He was a Swedish man and he was a chemist and created many new inventions.

Among his most famous patents was dynamite. As you can imagine, over the years he acquired great wealth.

While Alfred had hoped his invention would be used for advancement in the world—clearing the way for railroads, for example—dynamite also became an instrument of war.

When Alfred’s brother died, a French newspaper accidentally printed an obituary for Alfred.

It read, “The Merchant of Death is Dead.” After reading what his own obituary, Alfred Nobel was bothered. He considered the fortune he had amassed. After some thought, he wrote his final will. He decided he would leave his millions to fund a prize: The Nobel Prize would honor great achievements in science, in literature, and in peacemaking.¹

When faced with the question of eternal life—or at least, eternal memory, Alfred Nobel made a stewardship decision that he would leave his wealth behind in a way that benefitted human culture, advancement and peace. Alfred Nobel is now not remembered as the King of Dynamite, but as the one who honored those who worked for peace and justice in the gate.

¹Frederic Golden, “The Worst and the Brightest,” in *Time Magazine*, Oct. 16, 2000

Stewardship at the gate is another kind of stewardship, one that calls us to be bothered. It is a stewardship of love. It is a stewardship of justice. It is a stewardship of the here and now, but I tell you it is a stewardship that will prepare us for the life to come. When we pray each week, or hopefully, each day, Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done, on earth as it is in heaven, those words should renew our commitment to practice love at the gate in this world, and prepare us to be received with love at the gates of eternal life. Amen.

Will you join me now in affirming the call to justice as our call of discipleship. This confession was written in the Presbyterian Church in 1967 as a witness to a period of enormous discernment for our country and for our church.