

“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”... What must I do?

The past few weeks have been incredibly difficult for all of us. Some of us have experienced devastating loss, some of us experienced difficulties and major disruptions of life, and for many we have experienced what I have heard a lot recently... inconveniences. There is no doubt that wherever you live in Western North Carolina, your life, our lives, will be changed from the epic storm that was. One of the prevailing questions I have heard is... “what must I do?”

I have so many stories about heartache, resilience, and the love in our community. In the past couple of weeks we have, all of us, witnessed the might of nature’s ability and we have witnessed the beauty of humanity coming together to help those in need. Also, when we hear about what is going on around the world, we continue to witness the sad side of our humanity and the difficult questions of what to do and when to do it, where to send death to, and then what do we do with all the rubble and damage afterwards?

“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” I wonder what drove the man in our Gospel lesson today to Jesus. I wonder what was going on in his life that caused him to run to Jesus, kneel down, and ask his question. What’s the desperation behind his question? What’s his desire?

We could, like many have, speculate about the young man in this story, but I think this lesson may be one of those face value lessons we can get from scripture. It may not be a metaphor, parable, or some question for someone way smarter than me. I think that chances are that we all have had times in our lives when we asked the same kind of question. I know I have. It’s a restless, sleepless night kind of question. It’s a daytime longing and a searching kind of question. It’s the kind of question that becomes a prayer or maybe even a call to our closest friend. It’s more than just a religious question, however. The question “what must I do” was an important and immediate question for the man in our gospel lesson and it is a question for us here and now also. This question, friends, is less a question about doctrine or theology, and it’s not about the future. It’s about this moment. It’s about life right now and it’s about being more alive than we were before. Given what we have experienced, seen, and heard about our question is what must we do to have the fullness of life right here, right now?

I think it's the question we ask when we bump up against our own finiteness and our powerlessness. The might of storms tends to remind us of such things. I wonder when you have asked this question. What was going on in your life? What was behind your question? What was your desire? Your need?

I think this question asks us to consider a quality of life, not a quantity. The man in today's gospel has plenty. He's rich with property, possessions, wealth. Haven't you had the experience of getting something you really wanted and then finding yourself still lacking? Something was missing and quantity could not fill the emptiness of quality.

"You lack one thing," Jesus tells the man. He already knows that. That's why he is asking his question. What Jesus does is show him a way forward. He offers a new day and a fresh start.

- I suspect each of you has asked that question when the weight of life was more than you could carry, when things were spinning out of control, when grief was strangling your soul, when the loss was irreparable and the time was ruined, when the life you were living was not the life you desired. Maybe some of you are experiencing that recently.
- After the storm I spoke with a couple who had spent hours upon hours weathering the storm in, under, and around local stationary train cars. The thought of riding out a storm that sounds like an approaching freight train ... in a freight train is hard for me to fathom yet this couple seemed to be less concerned about the possessions that they lost and far more thankful for the temporary shelter they now have and the promise of a few meals than any loss they suffered.

When I take stock of my life, I know that I have things that I like, I probably have duplicates of those things I like stored away in my basement that would drastically improve the quality of this couple's life. "You seem to be dealing with this rather well considering what you've been through" I said to the couple. "We are grateful to be alive" one replied, and the other said, "we got to watch the rain stop and feel the warmth of the sun, not everyone got to have that, we are lucky, and we are ready for a fresh start. Transformation and new life are happening right before our eyes.

- We all have heard stories of whole communities seemingly wiped from the face of the earth. We now hear stories about these communities, along with strangers from far and wide hiking, using ATVs, or even mule packing supplies into areas that will never be the same again. Transformation and new life are happening right before our eyes.
- Many of our beloved local camps are devastated, some wondering if they will be able to open their doors this summer to children who desperately need that sense of place and belonging in their lives. And, the people who work at and love these camps have come from far and wide to clean things up, support one another and our local communities, and have given their time and resources to provide safe places for children to learn, grow, and thrive. In a seemingly hopeless situation, many have given much so that generations of children will continue to be blessed by the ministry of camp for many generations to come. Transformation and new life are happening right before our eyes.
- Fr. Josh and I have spoken with Fr. John Roberts, who many of you will know from his time as a curate here a few years ago. Fr. John Roberts is the Rector of Transfiguration in Bat Cave. Although that church building is still intact, the road to it is now where the river is. Only the most intrepid mountaineer can get to it right now. That congregation and that community lost lives, property, and they have lost the certainty of a future that they can understand. And, they are actively working on how they can still be a church, even if they never get to step foot in that building again. Transformation and new life are happening right before our eyes.
- There are so many people from St. John in the Wilderness that I have either encountered or heard of volunteering their time and talents to helping those in need after Hurricane Helene. From Deacons that horseplay with precious innocent priests and get volunteer safety meetings named after them at local donation centers, to mental health professionals serving at local shelters focus on our unhoused neighbors, to doctors that helped set up emergency hospitals in the most affected areas, to everyone who moved logs, to all who checked on neighbors, brought food to people, gave hugs, to all who prayed with strangers. You are and will be a part of the transformation and new life that is happening right before our eyes.

- Over the past couple of weeks St. John in the Wilderness has received many thousands of dollars so that we might be able to assist displaced households with financial assistance during this very real time of struggle. Because of the generosity that you and many others have shown, we have been able to mitigate much of the difficulties brought from the storm to many, many families in our area. Transformation and new life are happening right before our eyes because of your hard work and generosity. I think our Gospel lesson today is one of those times when we can take Jesus' instructions on face value and you are all doing it. Thank you and I humbly ask us all to remember that the transformation and new life that we are witnessing and are a part of will take years rather than days or weeks, so please take care of yourselves so we can keep it up.
- I suspect all those affected by Helene, Milton, by violence throughout the world are asking the question and looking to recover themselves and their lives. "What did I do wrong, what did I lack to deserve such trouble?" This is a question that has and will be asked for ever. I can't and don't have the answer to that question, but what I do have to offer is the words of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and I believe with every fiber of my being, that when we are able to answer the question "what shall I give?" with the answer "all that I have" then transformation and new life will happen right before our eyes.

What must I do to inherit eternal life? What must I do to find myself again?

What must I do to be more fully alive? How do I step through the impossibility of what is and into the possibility of what might be?

We'd like to turn back time, undo the past, escape the moment. That's impossible. That's not going to happen. Helene will not backtrack into the Gulf and the really hard things that have happened in our lives will always have happened now. You know that and so do I. But what is the possibility in that impossibility? That's our real question and it's the one the man in today's gospel ([Mark 10:17-31](#)) is asking. He wants a different quality of life, a second chance, a new beginning, a new day. I know about that, and I'll bet you do too.

It's so easy to hear Jesus' words as a challenge, as something to be accomplished, as demanding more than we are prepared to give or do. "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

But what if we hear Jesus' words as words of hope and words of salvation? I am not talking about salvation as a reward, as being made safe, or even comfortable; but as being turned upside down, being unhinged, a reordering of life, a freedom to become, the gift of a new day. And I am not talking about hope as a feeling, a wish, or an escape from this moment; but as a coming of the possibility in the impossible, a voice, a calling that asks a response from us.

Isn't that really what Jesus is offering the man in today's gospel? Hope. Salvation.

To get this new life, the old one must be let go of. And that's hard when there is so much to let go of. The man is invested in what he has. Most of us are. And what he wants will cost him everything he has. There can be no holding on to the things or events of the past if we want to step into a new day. That doesn't mean we forget, deny, or ignore the past. It just means the past no longer defines what is or is not possible.

This letting go of the old for the new is not a trade, an exchange, or a balancing of the books. And it's not a price we pay to God. It's about the freedom to become, the freedom to step into a new life, the freedom to see the possibility in the impossible.

What might you need to let go of in order to step into a new day and make a fresh start? What possibilities await you in what looks like the impossible?

This is not easy work. When the man heard what Jesus had to say "he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions." There's a lot to let go of. Sometimes it's monetary wealth and possessions; sometimes it's a wealth of anger, fear, guilt; sometimes it's a wealth of busyness, our calendar, and task lists; sometimes it's the wealth of our reputation, another's approval, or our power; sometimes it's the wealth of ingrained habits and attitudes.

I can understand why the man feels what he does, can't you? We invest ourselves in lots of stuff and I like my stuff, don't you? For better or worse it has brought us to this point in life, but then something happens, and we realize that it can take us no further. And I grieve when what I have is lost, taken away, or let go of.

We often hear this story as saying the man chose not to follow Jesus, but that's not what the text says. Today's gospel does not say that he refused to do what Jesus said. But neither does it say that he did what Jesus said. It says he turned away grieving. Maybe he went home and immediately sold his stuff, gave the money to the poor, and chased after Jesus. Maybe he did it a month later or eight years later. Or maybe he never did it. We just don't know. And that's ok. What he did or did not do is not the issue. The issue is about us, what we do or do not do.

Do you know what happened the morning after the man went away grieving? The same thing that happened the morning after Helene made landfall, the same thing that happened the morning after any of our loved ones died, and the same thing that happened the morning after you faced the hopelessness and impossibility of your life.



A new day dawned, and the sun rose once again. Light and warmth entered our world. What more could we ask for? That's the miracle in the impossible. That doesn't necessarily make life easy or comfortable. It makes new life possible.

Please do not hear that as some sappy, feel good, Hallmark kind of thing. Hear it for what it is because I believe it, I have seen it, I see it in all of you. Hope. Salvation. The possibility of a fresh start. Life resurrected. The dawn of a new day. A gift.

Let's go share it.