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Peace Lutheran Church
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TEXT: Mark 10: 17-31

My cousin died while Mary and I were on vacation. Kris was 61, younger than me by three years. She died of issues related to her alcoholism—that and a neglectful husband. Truly sad.

At her funeral the pastor did a marvelous job of proclaiming the Gospel, despite the fact that he hadn't known her. (The husband chased the pastor off when he attempted to visit.) That being said, there was a presumption on the part of Kris' immediate family that Kris was a Christian. I'm not sure she was.

Just like Olivia will be this morning, Kris was baptized as an infant, at the family's home congregation, Trinity Lutheran in Waukegan, Illinois. She confirmed her faith when she was a teenager. She taught Sunday School and helped with VBS when she was a young woman—but for the last 30 years of her life, excepting the funeral of her father and the baptism of her two daughters, Kris hadn't darkened the door.

And yet Megan and Carly, in their eulogies about their mother, stated their joy that their mother was “in a better place” where “she wouldn't be suffering.” We all hoped that for Kris, of course, but I can't say with any certainty that she did, in fact, die as a believer and is today enjoying “a better place.”

I sometimes read the obituaries just to see who's died and what I can learn about family connections, etc. According to the obits, everyone is in “a better place.” Have you ever read an obituary in which the deceased was described as a bad person, a spiritual reprobate and who is now languishing in hell? (Pause) Well, have you? Of course not! We all wish the eternal best for our loved ones but, in fact, can we know with certainty of anyone's salvation?

This issue of salvation, eternal life, came up in today’s Gospel reading, didn’t it? Turn to Mark, chapter 10, verse 7. (Pause.) What does the rich young man say in that very first verse? “*Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*” We know—at least I hope you know—that this man had a faulty understanding of how to achieve salvation. He thought he needed to do something, behave in a certain way, jump through some religious hoops in order to earn eternal life. A lot of people today think that’s true, too—maybe some of you do; certainly Kris’ daughters and immediate family thought so.

You see, they kept telling me and each other what a wonderful person Kris was (in spite of her alcoholism). “My mother was always there for me,” Megan reminisced. “She held my hand when I was afraid.” Carly chimed in, “We had fun girls’ nights together. She always encouraged me,” etc. etc. Kris worked at a high school cafeteria, as a cashier, and students told of how she would dig into her own pocket to pay for students’ lunches when they were short. Her sister told of how she would give away her own personal possessions if a co-worker, most of whom were minorities, expressed a need or a want. She gave away blenders and food processors and groceries from her own kitchen to these co-workers, many of whom were present at her funeral to testify to her largesse. There is no doubt that my cousin was a good and generous woman. But is that what gave her daughters and so many others the conviction that she is currently “in a better place?” I think so. They believe that Kris’ goodness—the fact that her character and her good deeds outweighed her deficiencies, her alcoholism and her bad deeds—that is what brought her to heaven. In the divine scheme of things, on the scales of meritorious living, Kris, in the eyes of her family and friends, won—and so she deserved respite from her suffering and now, post-death, is in “a better place.”

They are wrong. I’m not saying that Kris is in hell and that she’s not in a better place but I know for certain that if she’s in heaven today (and I hope she is), she’s not there because she was a good person, because her good deeds outweighed her bad ones. That’s not how salvation works.

You see, this is the erroneous thinking that Jesus was trying to correct on the part of the rich, young man who came to Him, seeking eternal life. And, simultaneously, Jesus was seeking to teach the way to salvation to His various disciples, who were listening-in on this encounter.

Look at verse 18. Jesus responds to this rich man's query with a question of His own. "Why do you call me good?" Jesus asks. (Remember the man had just addressed Him as "Good Teacher.") Jesus goes on to say, "No one is good but God alone." Subtly, Jesus was challenging this man to think about goodness—far beyond what he or Kris' relatives and friends thought about goodness—and to see that goodness is truly deeper than behavior and outward appearances. True goodness is way deeper than that—and it escapes all of us who are human. It has to do with what we think and what motivates us—purity, we might say. And Jesus is saying that true goodness only belongs to God. So, if the rich man is calling Him "good" and really meant it, he would be saying that Jesus is God—which, of course, He was.

But Jesus is never a braggart. He's always a gentleman. He's announcing His divinity here to any who has the ears—and the heart—to hear it. This is important because, in a minute, He's going to tell this man what's necessary for eternal life and it's important that Jesus establishes His credentials. He is God.

Jesus goes on in verse 19 to give the standard answers to what most people thought was the route to salvation, the way to "a better place." These are the same things which Kris' friends and relatives think led to her salvation. Jesus cites some of the commandments: "*Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.*"

You need to understand, people, that Jesus isn't being serious here. He's speaking tongue-in-cheek. He is not saying, "Do all these things and you'll gain heaven." He's giving the pat answer, the standard response of the time—and still yet today: the divine scale thing.

The man, in earnest, responds, "*Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.*"

And this next line, verse 21, is where we find our Gospel today, folks. Here's the good news: "*Jesus, looking at him, loved him...*" Oh, sweet Jesus! You loved even this man who gave You the wrong answer. You loved this pathetic fellow who failed the test, the spiritual dropout.

Ladies and gentlemen, doesn't the fact that Jesus loved this man who was so far off-track in terms of his understanding of God and salvation encourage you? Doesn't Jesus' love for this man encourage you to believe that Jesus could love you, too—stubborn, prideful, foolish, addicted, mean-spirited, self-centered, nasty, arrogant sinner that you are? Amazing grace! Jesus, knowing that this man had gotten it all wrong, still loved him. Jesus could look into the heart of this man—and, as God, would see it all—and still love him.

Jesus continues to do the same with you today, Dale. He looks at you, knows all that's been wrong and continues to be wrong, and He still loves you. And John, Jesus looks right into your eyes and down into your soul. He knows it all—all of your pride, all of your selfishness, all of your sin, and still loves you. And you, Annalise, he looks at you and sees not just the pretty, sweet young girl we see, but all the unkindness within you, all of the ways you've thought about your fellow students, all of the kind things you could have done but didn't, and He still loves you. And He still loves me—proud, selfish, carnal, undisciplined and people-pleasing pastor that I am. He still loves me.

He knows us and loves us anyway, friends—and that is Good News indeed! “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.” Hallelujah!

But now Jesus goes on to tell the rich man how it is that he may get eternal life for himself. Verse 21: “*Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*” Let's be careful now. Jesus isn't writing a prescription here for all of us. He's not saying that we all need to rid ourselves of all property, giving the proceeds to the poor, and thereby earn our ticket to heaven. It may sound like that but this is where we need to know all of scripture and not just some. We need to understand what Jesus is really saying here.

You see, this rich man's first priority, that which controlled his life, was his wealth. That was where his allegiance lay and we know that because he couldn't give it up. It had its grip on him. Verse 22: “*At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.*”

Jesus knew this man needed a radical wealth-ectomy or the cancer of money that controlled him would return and re-capture his life.

The message here for you is this: What has its hold on your life? What is it that claims your allegiance? What controls you, keeping you from following Jesus fully? Perhaps it is money that consumes you. This can take different forms, like security for your future. Maybe it's a house, a job, a relationship. Maybe it's drugs or alcohol or a gambling addiction. Maybe it's preoccupation with health or beauty or popularity. Maybe it's something in your past or something looming in your future that possesses you. Maybe its sports or video games or pornography that's all you can think about.

What is it that Jesus would ask you to give up in order that He may take first place in your life? You see, what Jesus said to that rich man isn't necessarily prescriptive for all of us. He's going to ask something different—and difficult—of me, and another thing of you, Bethany, and another thing of you, Jeremy. Whatever controls you, whatever you love more than God Himself is going to be what Jesus asks you to give up.

And why? So that you may follow Him. Jesus cited some of the Ten Commandments in His response to the rich man but He didn't cite the one that's in first place. If you know it, say it with me: *"I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before Me."*

The rich man had a god that needed to be cast down from the throne of His life before God Himself could take that place. All of us have some idol, some other god, which needs to be de-throned before God can move in and take over. The Bible calls God a *"jealous God"* (Exodus 34:14) not because God's insecure and threatened by some other "deity," but because God knows we won't be able to enjoy this life, nor eternal life, if we are running after anything but Him.

After Jesus told that rich man to sell all of His possessions and give that money to the poor, what did He invite him to do? (Solicit response.) That right: *"Then come, follow Me."*

You see, it's only in having an uncontested relationship with God—not flirting about with other allegiances—that we receive both an abundant life in the here-and-now and eternal life, which is what the rich man sought. We don't get to heaven, we don't get to the “better place” my cousin's daughters wanted for their mom, because of our goodness, because we're kind and generous and follow the various commandments. We get to heaven because of our relationship with God—and that by His grace.

Ephesians 2:8 & 9 says (project on wall): *“For it is by grace you have been saved, though faith (i.e. our relationship with God), and this is not our own doing; it is the gift of God, so that no one can boast.”*

Faith. Trust. Relationship with God. That's what Jesus was inviting the rich man into when He said, *“Come, follow Me.”* And it's through that relationship that eternal life is granted.

Jesus' disciples were confused—the text says *“amazed”*—at His response to the rich man. Jesus then reiterates with the proverb: *“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to eternal heaven.”* Why's that? Because most rich people—not all, but most—have put their trust, their faith, their lives into their money. It's becomes their god—and that god can't save them, can't deliver eternal life.

My cousin Kris wasn't rich but she had another god which took first place in her life: the bottle. Jesus might have said to her, *“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a drunk to enter the Kingdom of God.”* You see booze had ascended to the throne of Kris' life and it was to that god, albeit unwillingly, that Kris had committed her life.

So, is Kris in hell? She died a drunk as far as any of us knows.

I won't say Kris has missed out on heaven, even though it would appear that way because of what Jesus said about the camel going through the needle's eye. What won't I say this? Because I believe Jesus looked at Kris, just like He did at that rich, young man—and just like He looks at

us—and He loved her. He also said in verse 27: “*With man it is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.*” Even, I hope, the salvation of my drunk, and now dead, cousin.

So, I won’t pass judgment on Kris’ salvation. That’s not my job. My job is to persuade you, dear friends, beloved congregants, that you don’t have to worry about your salvation. You don’t have to wonder or fret about it. You can have the “blessed assurance” that heaven awaits you because you have accepted God’s invitation to follow Him—and in so doing, in that relationship which God initiated with you, eternal life is yours. You have not, like that rich man, turned away.

Today, Jeremy and Gretchen, Jerad and Carrie bring little Olivia to the baptismal font. In so doing, they are saying that they believe Jesus loves her, just as He looked at that rich man and loved him. They are not having Olivia baptized because they believe that baptism, in and of itself, will save this precious little one—that this ritual is her ticket to heaven. No, they bring her to be baptized today because they believe that God has already claimed this child as His own, that He loves her and that He wants to bestow on her all the blessings of a relationship with Him: being a part of His family (the Church), the family’s name (Christian), the gift of the Holy Spirit, an abundant life and, at her death, eternal life. These are the gifts of God bestowed upon Olivia, and each of us, in baptism. These gifts are all grace—and beautifully depicted in the baptism of an infant who hasn’t, couldn’t, do one single thing to earn them.

As Olivia grows, she will have the opportunity to appropriate these gifts to her life, understand and accept them for what they are: gifts of God to her. At some point, whether at Confirmation or at some other time in her life, we pray she will say, overcome by her realization of God’s grace: “Thank You, God. Thank You for all You’ve given and done for me. I love You, too!” It’s the job of her parents, her godparents and the whole Church to be agents of the Holy Spirit in leading Olivia to that day of declaration when she accepts and rejoices over all God has done for her. Today, even though she can’t hear it or understand it, Jesus is saying to her, as he said to that rich man and as He says to each of us: “Come, follow Me.” We pray she will—and, in doing so, come to delight in “a better place.” Amen.

Songs:

Opening	“Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty” (ELW#413)
After O.T. Reading	“No Matter What” by Stevenson <i>et al</i>
Sermon	“Blessed Assurance” (ELW#638)
Special	“There Is Nothing Greater Than Grace” by Hall <i>et al</i> (Worship Team)
Closing	“Amazing Grace” (ELW#779)