

Tracy Daub
10/10/21—University Presbyterian Church
Mark 10:17-31

SCARY STORIES

This is the season when we seek out the scary and the frightening. When I was a lot younger I didn't mind watching horror movies or going to haunted houses. But I seem to have lost my tolerance for them as I have grown older. Perhaps that is because I am all too aware of the genuine scary stories that are part of our lives and world.

In terms of biblical stories, the passage we have today from Mark's gospel is among the scariest. A wealthy guy comes to Jesus wanting to know what he must do to have eternal life. He has led a faithful life and been devoted to keeping the commandments. In other words, he is like a lot of us. But he is told by Jesus to sell all his possessions, to give his money to the poor, and then to follow Jesus. When the wealthy man turns away, unwilling to do what Jesus tells him, Jesus says his disciples, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God."

Notice that Jesus does not tell this man to give a *portion* of his wealth to the poor. He does not tell him to draw up a budget for charitable giving. We could all get behind such a command as that. No, Jesus says, give it *all* away.

I told you this was a frightening story, didn't I? Because if Jesus demanded this kind of radical act from this rich guy in the story, what might he demand of us? What might Jesus be asking of you and me?

Down through the centuries, Christians have endeavored to make this story more manageable, more palatable. We have told ourselves that this was a unique requirement made to

this one individual and that it doesn't apply to us. We have argued that story just pertains to very rich people and not to the rest of us who are not. We have embraced some explanations like the one that says that the "eye of the needle" Jesus was speaking about was really a big gate called "the eye of the needle" through which a camel could, with difficulty, pass through but only after dumping its load and getting down on its knees. A difficult but not impossible task. So there is still hope for rich people. We've struggled to find ways of explaining this hard and frightening passage.

But in truth, we have every reason to believe that this passage is directed at us. We are the rich. We might not be as wealthy as Bill or Melinda Gates, but if we can put gas in our car whenever it is empty, if we can afford to take a vacation, if we can go out to eat when we don't feel like cooking, then by much of the world's standards, we are rich. So this story takes on personal meaning for us sitting here today. We are the rich of whom Jesus speaks.

So that makes this a scary story for us. We are left to figure out what it means for us and our lives. Does Jesus expect *us* to divest and give all our money to the poor? That bit about it being easier for a camel to go through an eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God seems pretty discouraging. Jesus' words are designed to unsettle us, to make us uncomfortable, to cause us to sit up in our chairs and take notice. So I am not going to try to make this passage comfortable for us. I'm going to let it disturb us because that seems to be what Jesus wanted it to do.

Jesus understood the great obstacle wealth presents to the Kingdom of God. When Jesus spoke about the Kingdom of God, he was not only referring to the place that awaits us after we die. Recall how Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God is at hand." That meant the Kingdom of God, which means the Way of God, the place where we are in harmony with God, is near to us right

now. Jesus understood that the richer we are, the harder it is for us to live in God's household and honor God's ways. God commands us to have no other gods, and yet wealth is one of the strongest idols we have. No matter how much money we have, we *always* feel we would be better off if we had just a little more. Our wealth and material goods provide us with a sense of security and hold a powerful influence on our choices and priorities. All too often our possessions come to possess us as we work and live to acquire and guard and care for them. And along the way, we become distracted from God and the way of God. We trust God less and trust our bank accounts more.

The wealthy man in our story had a sincere desire to walk God's ways. He had been a model believer, and kept the commandments, and been a good citizen, and followed the rules. He had done everything that was expected of him. And yet, it is clear from his question to Jesus about how he might find eternal life that this man was somehow not yet content. He was still searching for something. Something in his very law-abiding life was not quite satisfying. Something was still missing. I wonder how that feeling might resonate with any of us today.

But after the wealthy man declared his faithfulness to God's laws and commandments, we are given an interesting detail. We are told that Jesus looked at him and "loved him." He *loved* him! Maybe Jesus understood this man's deep longing for wholeness. Maybe Jesus understood how much this man desired to know God's abundant life. And he loved him for it. As he loves us. And so Jesus says, "Well, it looks like there is only one thing left for you to do. Sell everything, give the money to the poor and you will find the treasure you seek, and then come and follow me." But the man could not bring himself to let go of his possessions and turned away.

Jesus' demand upon this man, Jesus' demand upon us, is not measured or moderate. It is radical. He called this man to let go of the things and the attitudes to which he clung for security and to become a fully devoted citizen of the Kingdom of God.

That's Jesus' desire for all of us: for us to become fully devoted citizens of the Kingdom of God. Maybe the most crucial question we can ask ourselves after hearing this story is, "What is needed for me to become a fully devoted citizen of the Kingdom of God? We know what kept the man in our story from being a fully devoted citizen of the Kingdom of God. But what about you? Can you identify what that is for you--what thing, what attitude, what priority, what security, what anger? And then, can you divest yourself of *that*? It's frightening stuff!

Jesus calls us to become fully devoted citizens of the Kingdom of God because he knows that when we do, we will find abundant life. Do you recall how Jesus tells the wealthy man that by selling his possessions and giving the money to the poor, he will find his treasure? The demand Jesus makes of us is not intended to turn us into unhappy martyrs. Instead, Jesus desires to give us a *treasure!* Jesus declares that we do not give anything without receiving back more than we can imagine: more joy, more love, more life, more meaning. The treasure Jesus offered the man in our story, the treasure he offers us, is abundant life, genuine life right now while we are yet alive on this earth.

All scary stories contain within them the specter of death. Whether horror movies or haunted houses, it is the element of death that frightens us. Death also looms behind the scenes of our story today. Because the scariest story of all, the one Jesus understood as the most frightening of all possibilities, is for us to have lived this life as those who are *already* dead.