

“An Upside-Down World”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
October 14, 2018

Mark 10: 17-31

I have a confession to make. It’s not an easy thing to admit, but I feel like I need to come clean. I think I may have a problem with collecting too many Lego sets.

It kind of hit me in the face on Thursday when I had to meet a service technician at our house. To do the work he needed to do, he had to go down in the basement. Well, I don’t know about your basements, but ours is where we just throw everything without any rhyme or reason. In fact, if you came to our home for Erin’s Open House in June, there’s still a lot of stuff down there which we stored “temporarily” to make the main floor look presentable.

Anyway, when I took the technician down to our basement, I became very self-conscious about the number of Lego boxes that were visible. Maybe you have had the same feeling when you have to let a stranger into your house, and you wonder what must be going through his or her mind as they scan your surroundings and belongings. He didn’t say anything, which in some ways made it worse. But as I looked around I thought, “I really need to get a handle on this.”

One last thing – don’t tell my wife, Debbie, I shared this with you. I’m hoping that if I can admit to her my Lego problem, she might confess to her propensity for yarn and knitting. (Look over at Debbie) Shoot – you’re here. We’ll talk later!

Actually, what also made me think about all my Legos and other possessions was witnessing the destruction caused by Hurricane Michael this week. The pictures from the panhandle of Florida are unimaginable. Homes splintered and wiped off their foundations. Buildings and trees snapped and broken like they were Lego sets. The debris field – a mixture of buildings and trees and people’s belongings, such as furniture, photos, clothing, family heirlooms – instead of those belongings being safe and secure from the elements, they are all mixed together as part of the elements.

Last month, it was the never-ending flood waters of Hurricane Florence, which overwhelmed towns, homes, and people’s lives. All that our neighbors had worked for, had saved up, had invested in, much of it will end up in a dumpster or bulldozed to the ground. Susan Roberts was in North Carolina with the American Red Cross, and saw first-hand the despair people are living through. When we come face-to-face with the power of Mother Nature, we are left to wonder what are all of these

things which we possess, if in the end something so much greater than us can take them all away in a matter of minutes – even seconds.

Why are we so beholden to what we own? Why do we allow our identities to be determined by our possessions, and by how much we have compared to others? Why is it so hard to let go of our belongings as they identify us, when in fact the only possession we need to identify us is faith? As we read this story from Mark's Gospel, we are reminded that God's kingdom just might be upside down from what we want or expect.

I always wonder what possessed the man to run up and ask Jesus, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Was he motivated by self-righteousness, thinking that since he had done so well in the world with all his possessions, he wanted to receive the religious seal of approval from Jesus? Or was he questioning what the point was of all this worldly-success that he had achieved? Did he find himself unfulfilled, seeking something more than measuring his self-worth by how much more he had than his neighbors? Could he have been yearning – much like we often do – for a sense of purpose and meaning amid all this stuff that envelopes our lives?

Jesus responds to him with the final six of the Ten Commandments, those commandments that speak to how we as God's children are to live in community with one another. And the young man answers that he has followed all of these since his youth. He has honored his parents; he has not committed murder, adultery, or fraud; he has not born false witness against a neighbor; he has not stolen from someone else. He has tried to live his life according to the Jewish customs and law, as laid out in the Torah. If he has done all this, what else must he do to inherit eternal life?

What's ironic about that question is that one cannot do anything to receive an inheritance; when you inherit something, it is gifted to you at the time of someone's death. The man's question implies that we somehow have something to do with our salvation. In fact, the inheritance of eternal life is truly a gift given freely to us, and yes, it is through someone's death. But what changes the equation is that it also is dependent on not just death, but also resurrection hope.

Instead of giving the man an answer about inheriting eternal life, Jesus answers by stating what is required for discipleship. And Jesus rocks the man's world: "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then, come follow me" (10:21). He removes his possessions as the main trait which forms his identity, and he tells him how those possessions might serve God in a way that serves God's kingdom – give the money to the poor. That decision will also free him to serve: "then, come, follow me." Instead of being read into a will to receive an inheritance, the man is given a series of commands to follow.

One thing to also consider about this story is the cultural context in which it is set. The world in which Jesus lived was ruled by the Roman Empire. It was a society based on hierarchical power and prestige, shaped very much like a pyramid. At the top of the pyramid was the Emperor, with all the power at his disposal. At the bottom were the poor, with no voice or power whatsoever. In the middle were religious authorities, tax collectors, and yes, individuals who had accumulated wealth and prestige in the midst of this social pyramid.

Now, knowing that historical context, consider Jesus' words in a new light. "Sell what you own, give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God. 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. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." There is no pyramid structure in the kingdom of God; the first will be last, and the last will be first. An upside-down world, to be sure.

So, how do we take this story and apply it to our lives? Are we all called to sell what we own – our houses, our cars, our Lego sets – and give the money to the poor? As Christians, how do we view our wealth of money and belongings, if Jesus tells us "how hard it will be for those with wealth to enter the kingdom of heaven?"

James Thompson writes: *The problem is not wealth per se but our attitude toward it. As we accumulate riches, we are tempted to trust in our possessions and our powers of acquiring them, rather than in God, for our ultimate security and comfort. Even honestly acquired and generously shared wealth can thus lead to pride. This is why it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. It is hard to let go of the immediate basis of our security and comfort – and the more we have, the harder it gets* (*Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 166).

I've never felt this story is about us turning in all of our stuff and living in a convent. It's a story about gaining perspective on our lives, on understanding where all our belongings first come from, and being motivated in gratitude to serve our fellow sister and brother in Christ. It is a reminder that our self-worth is not directly tied to what we own, how much we make, or where we are in our social pyramid. Our self-worth is directly tied to how we use the riches God has given us to bring others to the table and embody the kingdom of God here and now.

David Howell puts it this way: *Life in the kingdom of God is about transformation and character change. With the demands and temptations of life bearing down upon us, we want to cry out like the disciples, "Then who can be saved?" Who can live a kingdom life? How can I change? How can I take the necessary first steps?*

Being in the company and presence of Jesus is a good first step. Character transformation begins with identification with Jesus ("Come,

follow me”). And identification with Jesus signifies that character change is not only a slow process but also a relational process. Likewise, nestled and nurtured in the company of believers, people are enabled to take first steps into new behavior.

When the disciples exclaimed, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus responded with hope: “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible” (v. 27). Those thick-skulled disciples had finally understood something: just how hard it is to change and to live out kingdom ethics.

For them and for us, Jesus holds out the hope that, with God, change and first steps are not only possible but are already happening. So it should not be surprising that, as the result of first steps, “many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (v. 31) (ibid, 168).

I know the youth shared about this two months ago, but one of the things I was most struck by on our mission trip this summer to Floyd County, Kentucky, was the deep generosity of the people we worked with. In past years, we have worked on people’s homes and they have been kind and grateful, and we’ve come away feeling good about the work we did. But this year, the people we worked for treated us like we were their guests. They fed us, they offered us drinks, they hosted us like we were members of their family. And they had very little in terms of wealth or possessions as compared to us. They were the working poor of this country, the bottom of the social pyramid, as it were. And I came away from that week feeling like I had been blessed beyond measure. The kingdom of God is truly an upside-down world.

Next week, we will celebrate God’s goodness to us on Stewardship Sunday. We are all asked to consider anew how we view our wealth and possessions and belongings in light of God’s kingdom shown to us in Jesus Christ. Will we clutch tightly to our sense of security in what we have, or will we let go and trust that with God, all things are indeed possible? May we be able to truly believe that statement of our Lord, and then the faith to follow him with all that we are and have, so that God’s kingdom might be realized here and now.

“For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.