

The Guest House

Mark 10:17-31

He woke up - absolutely sure this was going to be the best day of his life - if only he'd known But he didn't. The teacher was known to be walking through the man's "little kingdom" - at least that's how he liked to think of his collection of farms and vineyards - and today was the day that he would acquire the jewel of all jewels: eternal life. He'd heard the rabbis speak of it, this prize above all prizes, that only the very few and very righteous would receive and he was confident that he had what it took to achieve it. He had, after all, studied the Torah and kept it faithfully since he was old enough to know right from wrong. He had taken the lands that he had inherited from his father and doubled them, securing the previous owners of the lands that he had acquired as indentured workers to sow and reap and harvest his wealth. Blessings upon blessings that proved his righteousness before God. And today. Today he would see the Good Teacher and learn the secret to that last and most elusive possession. He would have before he entered into his old age, everything he had ever wanted.

As he walked along the road to meet the teacher, passing through all that he owned, he felt a sense of deep satisfaction. Everything that his eyes could see was his: the land, the crops, the grapes, the wine, even the laborers of the field, all belonged to him, all the fruit of his own mind, his hard work, and his righteousness. Surely the Teacher would be impressed with all he had to offer, with the honor that he held in this

part of Isreal and, surely, in the eyes of the Holy One. And then, as he crested the hill, he saw him. The Teacher that all of Judea had been buzzing about. Surprisingly, he wasn't much to look at: dirty robe, his hair a mass of tangles around him, surrounded by a ragtag group of people that looked poorer than his most destitute laborer. And yet. The word had been true: there was something about this man. Something about the joy that exuded from him and captivated his followers. Something wise and so - present - in the way that he looked at them and moved among them. The man rushed to him and knelt before him, showing great humility, really, when he himself was clearly of higher station. "Good Teacher," he said - once again lowering himself to compliment the man before him. Surely this would make a good impression! He swallowed hard and then asked the question that had hounded him since his youth: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" He would later look back on his naivete with amazement. How could he have been so confident, so certain of favor? But in this moment, he was wide open, putting himself and his soul at the feet of this legendary stranger. At first - though he was taken aback by the teacher's refusal to return the compliment he had been given - the answer was pleasing and familiar. Yes, yes! I have avoided murder, never have I committed adultery, never have I stolen, never have I born false witness in a court of law, never have I ... his heart jumped a bit at the mention of fraud. That wasn't in the commandments that Moses passed down, was it? But before he could interrogate that further, he was back on familiar ground. Ah, yes. Honor my father and my mother - in that he had excelled, multiplying the wealth of his father, protecting his good name so that his mother - may her memory be a blessing - would feel proud to call him

son. Yes. Relief washed over him as he answered: “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth!” The teacher paused and looked at him, and for a moment, the man was swept away by the love in that gaze, Love, love, pouring over him, flowing through him, love and belonging as he’d never known, love that surely was the key, the passage into that great prize, eternal life, love that he would give it all up for, all of it, everything he had and everything he was love... then something in him seized up, recoiled in the sea of that love. Here was a force that was beyond his control, beyond his achievements, beyond him. Perhaps this was some kind of magic trick, some decept to render him vulnerable and without defense. He put himself back on solid ground just as the teacher spoke once more. And the words that flowed from his mouth were an abomination. SELL all that he had? And give it away? To those who hadn’t earned it? Give it away? Surely this man was a huckster, a fraud. Surely this wasn’t the key to the life that he sought. He managed to get to his feet, he managed to turn away and walk, heavily, so heavily, back down the hill and towards his little kingdom. And something within him cried out with grief. To walk away from that love he had felt was such a loss. But to let it all go? All that he possessed? That was impossible! Nothing good could ever come from that. Surely. Nothing good would ever come of that.

Jesus had looked at him. Loved him. Jesus had SEEN him and sees us. He had seen a man possessed by his possessions and had tried to set him free. Tried to lift the scales from his eyes so that he could see - and enter - the Kingdom of God that was right before him. The Kingdom of God which surrounds us now.

For the Kingdom of God is like a lavishly appointed guest house. Everything we need and more is within our reach. It is beautiful, it is joyous, it is all around us. And none of it is truly OURS. It was loaned to us and to everyone on this planet to share. It is only accessible through community, through love, through gratitude for its abundance, freely given. It would be easier to push a camel through a sewing needle than it would be to enter this Kingdom while clinging tightly to the illusion that everything we have at our fingertips - our water, our food, our homes, our family, our beautiful earth - belongs to us, has been earned by us, is part of our own little kingdom over which we have dominion.

This story is - has always been - a hard one to hear. It's so hard to hear, in fact, that religious folks have been trying for millenia to soften the sting of its truth: that we cannot have one foot in the Kingdom of Me and the other in the Kingdom of God.

Yes, we have worked hard for whatever resources we enjoy. And it's understandable that want to take credit for the place we find ourselves in our lives. And, of course, we have earned the right to be proud of our achievements. I think God is proud of us when we use the gifts that we've been given to do something good, something that brings joy to us and to those we love, something that makes our lives more livable. But it is so very easy to be possessed by our possessions, to begin to fool ourselves into seeing them as our salvation, to lose our wonder and our gratitude for the miracles that are all around us. To forget that God is the Source of all that is good in our lives.

Jesus didn't want the rich man to feel guilty for what he had, he wanted to set him free from the illusion that what he had would save him. He wanted to show him - and his disciples - and us - the abundance that was available to him if only he would stop clinging and grasping and possessing and let go, allowed himself to receive and be grateful, to share and feel the joy of community, to follow Jesus all the way home to the most lavish Kingdom there is - the Kingdom, the guest house - that is right in front of us.

I know, firsthand, that it is incredibly difficult to untangle ourselves from our possessions. Our culture - like the culture of the Ancient Near East under the Roman Empire - works so hard to convince us that earning more, buying more, having more is the key to abundant life. And, truly, there is no realistic way that we can live in this time and place without having some money at our disposal, without working hard and acquiring some stuff, and trying to pay for college ... it is almost impossible to imagine life in these United States (or anywhere in the industrialized world) not in pursuit of wealth of some kind. The comfort of this passage comes from two things: Jesus sees and loves us - all of us - and, he asserts that, through God, all things are possible. I imagine that one of the reasons that the Kingdom of God that Jesus spoke of with such urgency is not a concrete reality is that it is so very very difficult to shift our thinking and our behaving to align with God's values. But, until by God's Grace the Kingdom is fully realized, we get glimpses of it. This season, we celebrate the glimpses of the Kingdom we receive when we

root ourselves in Gratitude and when we follow that gratitude towards love and find ourselves at home.