

Tracy Daub
10/14/18--University Presbyterian Church
Mark 10:17-31

SCARY STORIES

We are approaching that time of year when people like to be scared. Halloween is an occasion when people willingly engage what is frightening: they visit haunted houses, buy frightening costumes, and seek out scary stories.

For us people of faith, there could be no story scarier than the scripture passage we are given today from the Gospel of Mark. The wealthy man who comes to Jesus to learn what he must do to inherit eternal life is told by Jesus to sell all his possessions, give the money to the poor, and to follow Jesus. And then when the wealthy man turns away, unwilling to do what Jesus tells him, Jesus tells 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."

This passage should rightly scare the pants off of us. And because it is such a frightening passage, Christians down through the centuries have done their best to manage and to soften this passage. Here are some of the ways we have tried to manage this passage:

--We have told ourselves that Jesus was addressing this message to this one man, and didn't intend it to be directed toward the rest of us.

--We have told ourselves that Jesus' command applies only to rich people. And we aren't rich so it doesn't apply to us.

--Some scholars have maintained 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.

I hesitate to critique these time-honored management techniques of this passage because, well honestly, what are we supposed to do with such a passage? If we took it at face value, it would be too frightening. And so we tell ourselves that Jesus didn't really mean what he said.

But you know what? I think Jesus really meant what he said. And that makes it a frightening passage because now we are left trying to figure out what it means for us and our lives. Does Jesus expect *us* to divest and give the money to the poor? What is expected of us? Today I am not going to manage this passage in a way that offers us easy answers because truthfully, I don't have them. What I am going to do is to let this passage unsettle us, disturb us, maybe even frighten us.

Jesus meant exactly what he said because he knew the richer we are the harder it is for us to enter the Kingdom of God. When I speak about the Kingdom of God, I am not only referring to the place that awaits us after we die. Jesus repeatedly told us that the Kingdom of heaven is at hand, is near. So we know that the Kingdom of God is a place we are called to live in right now while we are alive. The richer we are, the harder it is for us to live in God's household and honor God's ways right now. God commands us to have no other gods, and yet wealth is one of the strongest idols we have. Our wealth and material goods provide us with a strong sense of security and hold such a powerful influence on our choices and priorities. And 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.

If we think Jesus was not speaking about us when he talked about the difficulty of rich people entering the Kingdom of God, we are deceiving ourselves. Economically, many of us here today may fall solidly in America's middle class, but by comparison to most of the world's people, we are indeed rich. If we can take vacations, go out to dinner when we don't feel like

cooking, or fill our gas tank when empty, we are rich. So this story takes on personal meaning for us sitting here today. We are the rich of whom Jesus speaks.

The wealthy man had a sincere desire to know what he must do to have eternal life. He had been a model believer. He had kept all the commandments, been a good citizen, followed the rules, and been faithful. He had done everything that was expected of him. And yet, he found his law-abiding comfortable life not quite satisfying. Something was still missing. Does that sentiment sound at all familiar to you?

Jesus looked at this man and we are told he loved him. Maybe Jesus could see how heart-sick he was. Maybe Jesus understood this man's sincere desire to know God's abundant life. 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."

Now, there is no doubt that economic justice may have played something of a role in this story. Jesus no doubt had a great concern for the poor. In Jesus' day the vast majority of people lived in grinding poverty. And the juxtaposition of great wealth next to great poverty has always been unacceptable to God. But that concern alone cannot explain away Jesus' command to this wealthy man. Jesus doesn't tell this man to give a *portion* of his wealth to the poor. He doesn't tell him to draw up a fair budget for charitable giving. We could all get behind such a command as that. No, Jesus says, give it *all* away. Jesus is not only concerned with the poor but also with the state of this rich man's heart. And so he tells him to give it all.

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?

I cannot tell you whether God also asks you to reorganize your personal relationship with wealth and possessions, specifically. Maybe God does. I don't know. But scripture does seem pretty clear that when Jesus calls us to follow him, he calls us to a radical way of life that demands our *all*. The faithfulness Jesus seeks from us is not moderate, not carefully measured, not sensible or restrained. Jesus seeks our whole being. And that is scary. Because it involves letting go of the things and attitudes to which we tightly cling for security. And it means entering the unfamiliar and unconventional. And it means taking risks. What is very clear from this story, is that the gospel of Jesus Christ demands that we take risks. And if the gospel of Jesus Christ is not moving you or me to take risks in giving our all to the way of Jesus, then it is likely that we are not following him very faithfully. Our story today is a frightening one because it demands something difficult from us, very difficult from us, maybe even impossible for us. On the other hand, the good news Jesus reminds us is that all things are possible for God.

The writer and pastor Leonard Vander Zee reflects upon the change that takes place in people once they commit their lives to Jesus. He notes that "I've seen it happen over and over, that once people get serious about following Jesus, you will start to see it in the bank account. They start to give away more money and refuse to surround themselves with more stuff. And it's not because they are trying to buy their way into heaven, but because they are becoming fully devoted citizens of the Kingdom of God."

That's the goal here, isn't it? The goal is for you and I to become fully devoted citizens of the Kingdom of God. So maybe the most crucial question we can ask ourselves after reading this story is not whether or not we too are supposed to completely divest ourselves of our material goods and give the money to the poor like Jesus asks of the man in the story, but maybe the underlying question this passage asks of us is, "What is needed for you to become a fully

devoted citizen of the Kingdom of God?" What keeps you from becoming a fully devoted citizen of the Kingdom of God? And can you divest yourself of *that*?

Jesus calls us to become fully devoted citizens of the Kingdom of God because he knows that that is where you and I will find genuine abundant life. Remember, he 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 to give our all is not just about sacrifice and hardship. Jesus declares that we do not give anything without receiving back more than we can imagine: more joy, more love, more life, more meaning. Treasure awaits us all in the abundant life that comes from following Jesus.

When you think about the scary stories and images that surface around Halloween, most of them relate in some way to death: dead people who come back to life, or monsters or evil characters who threaten to kill people. Halloween is frightening because it confronts our deepest fear, and that is death. Death is frightening. But the scariest story of all, the scariest story of all is for us to have lived this life *already* dead.