“Who do you love?” - Stephanie Sorge, 2/18/24

*“When I moved from one house to another there were many things I had no room for. What does one do? I rented a storage space. And filled it. Years passed. Occasionally I went there and looked in, but nothing happened, not a single twinge of the heart. As I grew older the things I cared about grew fewer, but were more important. So one day I undid the lock and called the trash man. He took everything. I felt like the little donkey when his burden is finally lifted. Things! Burn them, burn them! Make a beautiful fire! More room in your heart for love, for the trees! For the birds who own nothing– the reason they can fly.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Leave it to Mary Oliver to poetically encapsulate our relationship with stuff. Lent is a very appropriate time to ponder our relationship with things. Stuff accumulates, and taxes our resources. The things we think we own can end up owning us. Getting rid of stuff can be fearful or freeing. Our belongings may offer some sense of security. Or they may be tangible representations of intangible values. Stuff is more than just stuff, and it can be hard to let go.

That’s where today’s reading hits us - right in the storage! This story is found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and most Bible translations use the same story heading in each of the gospels. The CEB calls this “A Rich Man’s Question.” Luke identifies the man as a ruler right away, so he’s presumably wealthy, but it isn’t until the end of the story in Mark and Matthew that we learn this man had many possessions. Does it matter? Well, it’s easier for me to distance myself from a ruler or a rich man, but one who has many possessions? Yeah, that fits.

The man who approached Jesus had studied the Scriptures. He knew the commandments and kept them. There was no mandate or even expectation in Judaism that followers of God get rid of worldly goods and give everything away. Jesus didn’t tell everyone to give up their belongings to follow him. So why this man? And what does that mean for us?

Mark is the earliest written canonical Gospel, and scholars generally agree that Matthew and Luke shared at least two source materials - Mark, and a collection of teachings of Jesus nicknamed Q - anonymous, but not, well, you know. Matthew and Luke include much of Mark, with added details and embellishments, so when something is found in Mark but not in Luke or Matthew, we definitely want to take a closer look.

The man’s question is how to obtain eternal life. Jesus first responds, “You know the commandments…” and he lists a few of them - all commandments that govern our relationship with other people. In that list, Mark includes “don’t cheat,” or “you shall not defraud.” Matthew and Luke omit it, probably because it’s not one of the Ten Commandments. Surely Mark knew that, so why would he include it? Maybe this man had gotten wealthy by defrauding others, and that’s why Jesus told him to sell everything and give the money to the poor. Maybe he didn’t even realize it.

In “*Poverty, by America*,” Matthew Desmond looks at the ways the majority of Americans benefit from policies that directly or indirectly perpetuate poverty in this country. For example, in 2020 the federal government spent more than $193 billion on subsidies for homeowners and just $53 billion on direct housing assistance for low-income families.[[2]](#footnote-2) Desmond reports that “Every year, the average family in the bottom 20 percent of the income distribution, our poorest families, get about $26,000 a year from the government. But the average family in the top 20 percent… get[s] about $35,000 a year from the government.”[[3]](#footnote-3) In most cases, there is no intentional fraud or cheating, but we could make decisions that would, at least, unite us with the bottom 20%, even if that doesn’t fix the systemic issues. Recognizing our relative wealth and the unequal advantages we’ve had, we could, literally or figuratively, sell what we have and give the proceeds to the poor.

Jesus’s instructions to this rich man might be an invitation to reexamine his priorities and give up the things that keep him from being all in to follow Jesus. They might be a corrective for wealth built by unethical means. Or Jesus might be highlighting the reality that abject need and poverty coexist with excess wealth. It’s a reality that benefits those who have at the expense of those who do not. Does any of this hit close to home?

I’ve often laughed at the lengths some have gone to make a camel and eye of the needle an easier fit, but I find myself wanting to make this an easier reading for all of us. I’d like to, but I don’t think I can. It can put us in a defensive stance, like the disciples. “Look at all we’ve given up! That counts for something, right?” But if we start getting into the weeds of calculations, we’re on the wrong track.

The man asks about eternal life, and Jesus assures him that his reward in heaven will be great if he rids himself now of his earthly possessions. Is that not enough? Then maybe we need to be more concerned about the earthly plight of those who are struggling now, too. The reward isn’t just in the next life. Jesus responds to the disciples, affirming their sacrifice and saying that those who have sacrificed even their closest family members will receive a hundredfold - in this life! Now we’re talking about leaving not only wealth, but family, too. Is that what Jesus requires?

I tend to agree with the interpreters who think Jesus was referring to the family tensions and even divisions caused because his followers chose to follow him. Following Jesus is not easy. Dietrich Bonhoeffer could have stayed in the United States and avoided his suffering and death at the hands of the Nazis. There have always been saints who have made decisions and sacrifices we can’t imagine doing ourselves. Living in such radically Christ-like ways leads to tension and division. The Gospels are clear about that. Following Jesus can cost everything.

But it’s not all suffering. The gifts of being part of the body of Christ can be hard to quantify or calculate, but they are real. I dare say most of us get something out of this thing we’re doing together. It’s not all suffering, right?

Jesus didn’t come to reform and make incremental change. He came to radically upend the status quo. Making that a reality requires far more than just following the basic commandments. It requires a new way of living, individually and communally. We have to see that we belong to each other, and we have to care about that, deeply.

This story isn’t really about things or possessions or what we love. It’s about who we love. Are the choices we make governed by our love for God, and Jesus, and each other? Or are they governed by our own self-interests, our desires for security and control and comfort?

This is a question of Christian discipleship, but it’s also a question of our interconnectedness and humanity. It’s a question of what we owe each other. I’m grateful to Alec McLeod for pointing me to Peter Singer’s 1972 paper, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Singer, an atheist, makes a compelling argument for our moral obligations to each other that, if followed, necessarily lead us to lives of austerity and frugality. In other words, one can live like this without the trappings of Christianity and religion. The decision to do so might be one derived from duty or moral obligation, and it could be driven by compassion for others. That’s fine, but what’s missing is the love. Love for Jesus invites us into love for and community with others.

There is one more textual difference to note. I have no idea why Matthew and Luke drop it, but in Mark’s version of this story, Jesus looks at the man, and loves him, and then tells him to do the impossible. God’s love for us in Jesus Christ is prior to and independent of our own actions and behaviors. Even knowing how we’ll fail to do it all perfectly, God loves us still. Bonhoeffer is known to us in part because he is an outlier. His choices were extraordinary. Even so, he regretted some of the ways he failed to be bolder in his discipleship.

We fail. We will keep failing. What we know we \*ought\* to do might often feel impossible. Impossible for us, not not for God. Because despite our failures and the ways we fall short, God’s love for us remains steadfast.

If we try to live according to a moral or philosophical ideal, what happens when we fail? We feel bad about ourselves. We feel defeated, and perhaps give up trying altogether. Because we choose to follow Jesus in this journey, even when we fail, we will be loved. Before, after, and in between. On this journey, there is always grace. And nothing - no thing or collection of things - can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God!

1. https://www.rootsimple.com/2019/08/a-poem-by-mary-oliver/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.npr.org/2023/03/17/1158230630/poverty-by-america-book-review-matthew-desmond-evicted [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.bcheights.com/2023/10/15/poverty-by-america-desmond-dissects-increasing-financial-problems-in-the-u-s/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://personal.lse.ac.uk/robert49/teaching/mm/articles/Singer\_1972Famine.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-4)