

We're so used to looking at the "big picture" of the Gospels—the birth and baptism and death and resurrection of Jesus—that it's easy to forget about a story like today's

- Jesus developed a devoted following, but there must have been plenty of "one-day stands" as well—people who checked him out but didn't stick around
- The unnamed man we just read about had his moment with Jesus and then disappeared, never to be heard from again

Though he came out of nowhere, the man seemed serious about his spiritual life

- He ran up to Jesus and knelt, before asking a very good question: "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (*Mark 10:17*)
- He knew the Commandments and had "kept all these since my youth"
- Makes me wonder what his earlier years were like
- Perhaps he didn't always honor his father and mother in those days—or maybe he did something even worse

Jesus' response to him is unique in the Gospel of Mark—the only other reference connecting him with love is the Great Commandment

- Here the use of the word is clearly personal: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him..."
- With caring and compassion and even tenderness, Jesus made a devastating observation that sent the man running in the opposite direction
- "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own..."

Discussing the encounter later with his disciples, Jesus makes it clear that the man was burdened by his possessions

- The "Eye of the Needle" was a small gateway in the wall surrounding Jerusalem
- A camel could only pass through it unloaded and kneeling
- Metaphorically speaking, we can't enter the heavenly city weighed down by our baggage

In the subsistence economy of Jesus' day, the man we're reading about would have been considered wealthy

- He was "shocked" when commanded to "sell what you own," "for he had many possessions" beyond the necessities of life

- It's interesting how my theological dictionary defines wealth: "the accumulation of things of value"
- Jesus saw in this man's heart an attachment to heaping up possessions
- To use today's popular language, his "wants" were much greater than his "needs," to the point that they became a barrier to spiritual growth
- It's easy to be trapped by mixing up what we want with what we truly need

Take another look at the man's question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

- A person doesn't need to do anything to receive an inheritance, especially from God
- The man is caught up with being in control of his life
- The "one thing" he lacks might be the ability or willingness to look outside his own tidy world, to think of others before himself
- "Then come, follow me," Jesus says—once you recognize that God is really in charge

We should not take this passage as a polemic against wealth

- Remember, the Bible does not say that "money is the root of all evil"
- It's "the love of money," which is quite a different statement (*1 Tim 6:10*)
- At the very end of his Gospel, Mark surprises us with the observation that "many women" held vigil for Jesus at the Cross (*Mark 15:40*)
- Three of them, led by Mary Magdalene, are named as disciples and patrons: "These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee."

Nowhere else does Jesus ask anyone to give up all their possessions

- Even John the Baptist asks only for the extras—"Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise." (*Luke 3:11*)
- The Gospel call is for generosity—to respond to our blessings by giving back a portion to God
- The man in today's story could not accept Jesus' loving invitation—his attachment to possessions was too strong—so he "went away grieving" and was never heard from again

The four little words Jesus spoke are challenging for us today: “You lack one thing...”

- Only one thing?
- In the year since the stock market crash, we’ve been consumed with scarcity in ways never seen in my lifetime
- So many people have lost their jobs, and plenty of others fear they’ll be next
- The middle class dream of home ownership is on shaky ground, retirement savings, have been threatened, and food pantries are swamped
- A recent editorial cartoon made me wince: in a long line of people waiting to enter a soup kitchen, a man turns to the person behind him and says, “The recession is over—pass it on.”

Amidst all these troubles and fears, what do we make of the statement that “You lack one thing...”

- Jesus is referring to faith, of course, experienced through our relationship with God and our growth as disciples
- His conclusion that “for God all things are possible” is comforting in the abstract, but can sound a bit hollow when times are tough
- It’s tempting to return to the default setting of the American Gospel, “God helps those who help themselves.”
- That’s not in the Bible—it’s a quote from Benjamin Franklin
- The Gospel of Jesus Christ challenges us to look outside ourselves and join together with other believers in difficult times

Let me suggest three ways we can do that:

### **1. Give thanks to God**

- I often say there are only two forms of prayer: “Thank you” and “Help!”
- With words, or through the anguished yearnings of our hearts, lots of people are crying out for God’s help these days
- It’s important to do that, but don’t forget to give thanks as well
- Counting your blessings helps to banish the fears that so easily overcome us
- God’s presence with us in tough times is not just a comfort, but a secure foundation for our lives
- We can always be thankful for that

## **2. Be generous with your time and money**

- Time and energy are precious, limited commodities in our lives
- We need to invest a portion of them in our faith community, attending worship and participating in ministry
- On the back of this year's pledge card is a listing of our ministry groups—they need your help!
- If you're not already involved, check one of the boxes to offer your time and gifts—it will make a difference for others and for you

I talked in detail about money in my last sermon

- Let me just say now that if each of us gave a small percentage of our income to the church, we'd have plenty to support our ministries
- That method adjusts your giving if your income goes down, and you can share the bounty in your good years

## **3. Commit yourself to St. Timothy's**

- We have an amazing church family, but that didn't develop by accident—decades of love and caring were involved
- Every one of you has a part to play and gifts to give as we continue to build up the Body of Christ in this place
- You'll be receiving a pledge letter this week—please pray about how God is calling you to respond
- Your faithful commitment will make a difference for others—and for yourself in the process
- Here's an example of how that can work

Dee Scott has generously agreed to share with you some recent events in her family

- Dee's brother suffered from a serious respiratory condition, as well as other problems, and it was agonizing for loved ones to watch his disease progress
- He died very suddenly, taking the family by surprise and forcing them to make funeral plans while overwhelmed by their grief
- Dee's sister "didn't want anything religious," so you can imagine the tensions that arose in planning the service

I was copied on an email chain as the choir members rallied around Dee, offering to help in any way they could

- Many supportive phone calls were made, flowers were sent, and cookies and punch were served at the reception

Like many of us, Dee doesn't find it easy to ask for help, but finally she did

- After what they'd been through, the family really needed to spend time together after the funeral
- At the last minute the choir members pitched in to provide a meal for Dee's whole family that evening
- "Their support made all the difference," she said. "We were able to just sit back and enjoy each other and reflect on the service."

Dee's not the first to observe that our choir members "are just terrific people"

- Sharing their love of music has brought them close to each other, there are other stories like this one
- But there's even more to this than the generosity and caring of the choir

Joyce Culwell's leadership over the years has played a big part in building these bonds

- It's not just her gift for music at work here
- Since I've been at St. Tim's she's been putting energy into deepening their spiritual connections and inviting members to lead the weekly time of prayer and reflection
- Your financial gifts to St. Timothy's support Joyce's musical and spiritual leadership, leading in this case to an unexpected time of grace and healing for Dee's family

It's simply human to get caught up in what we think we need, and to lack the "one thing" Jesus held up to the wealthy man

- But in this family of faith, there's no need for anyone to go away grieving
- Together we can make a difference in the lives of others, while growing closer to God in the process.

Let us pray. Loving God, thank you for your presence with us today and always. We know in our minds that for you all things are possible. Open our hearts to receive the gift of your abundant love, and set us on fire with your Spirit to touch the hearts and lives of those around us. Amen.