

Sermon July 13, 2025 - “I Got Nothing” - Mark 10:17-27

Disciples Christian Church, Bartlesville, OK

(look down at notes - pause - then say:) “I got nothing.” You’re looking at me with anticipation that I’ll have a wonderful, uplifting sermon to share this morning...and I’ve got nothing.

[*pause*]

Well, that’s not entirely true. I do have the scripture I picked out for today. It’s not from the lectionary but it’s a text that’s always intrigued me; it’s the story about the Rich and the Kingdom of God in Mark 10:17-22 with the followup explanation in verses 23-27. So, I guess, let’s just start by hearing it:

The Rich and the Kingdom of God

17 As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

18 “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. **19** You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.’^[d]”

20 “Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.”

21 Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

22 At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

23 Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!”

24 The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is^[e] to enter the kingdom of God! **25** 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.”

26 The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?”

27 Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”

[pause]

Now, I have preached on this before, although I used the version in Matthew where the rich person is a ‘young man’. What struck me back then was the single line, “He went away sad, because he had great wealth.” I got hooked into what does it mean to have great wealth? I don’t have great wealth, do I? Do you? So I made the comparison between someone truly rich and - well, me. And it was easy to conclude I’m not rich. I only own a home, have 2 cars, eat every day, have 2 televisions, 2 computers, an iPad, iPhone, apple watch, a stereo system and a radio - but I’m not rich. I’ve only got 7 guitars after all - that’s not a lot. Is it? And I only have the furniture for the living room, dining room, kitchen, 2 bathrooms and three bedrooms and the two car garage with 2 tool chests, a snow blower, 2 lawnmowers...but I’m not rich, am I?

[pause]

It was a good sermon for it made the point that we can always find someone else who has more than we do or has something else we desire. If the statement, “I’m not rich” is only relative to those who are richer it makes us blind to what we already have; it makes those who have less than us pretty much invisible.

[pause]

But, as I said, that’s an old sermon - I’m sure you were looking forward to something new. Yet these past few weeks as I’ve thought about this text, I tried to look at it through the eyes of the participants beyond the rich man. And...I got nothing.

Well, maybe not entirely. This story has echoes of other stories so I went down that rabbit hole. At the beginning, the author puts words right out of the Torah on Jesus’ lips. Now, every Jewish follower of Jesus would know that they’re from Exodus, chapter 20 - the 10 commandments. The author even has Jesus ask, “Why do you call *me* good? No one is good - except God alone.” This points to the Shema, the Jewish prayer in Deuteronomy 6:4-5: **4** Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.[a] **5** Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

Scholars who’ve looked carefully at the words the gospel writers put on Jesus’ lips to ascertain whether they’re something Jesus might’ve actually said versus something written for the early community of followers felt that these first words through verse 22 are things any Judean would have known. They’re not distinctive statements. [*describe Five Gospels book and red-pink-grey-black definitions*] This whole first section is labeled grey.

But the next section, with the graphic exaggeration about the camel and the eye of a needle, those lines received a pink designation - they are something that could be authentic Jesus statements.

[pause]

So now we have 2 different Jesuses! And I'm back to where I began - I'm not sure what's happening in this text...aka - I got nothing.

But then I wondered about the line, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!" Why would he say that? I mean, sure, we might all think that at one time or another but it ties with the line, "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." Something about this line bothers me - and it bothered the scholars too - it's transactional. If you do this, then I will do that. A tit for tat. The promise of heavenly treasure as a reward for giving up wealth is almost certainly a later modification. It's just too transactional. It's not what Jesus' would say. In fact, this whole text starts with a transactional statement: "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" In today's vernacular, we might hear it as "Good teacher, what can I do to make a deal with you?"

And this made me say to myself, "What the heck? This doesn't sound right at all!" So I started wondering what is Jesus really asking us to give up, what stories did Jesus tell that were examples of how to do this. The first thing that came to mind was the story of the Good Samaritan so I tried analyzing that through a transactional lens. The story makes a clear comparison between the transactional approach of the two people who pass by and don't help the injured person. They assess the situation and decide it'll cost them too much to help - i.e., it's a poor deal - so they walk on by. In contrast, the Samaritan who by all rights has no reason to help, stops and gives up his time and money to help. He gives up the transactional relationship.

Then I remembered the whole Sermon on the Mount series in Matthew which starts with the beatitudes: "Congratulations to the poor in spirit! Heaven's domain belongs to them." How about that? The very people who can't make deals, who can't be transactional because they don't have anything, they're the ones who receive Heaven's domain! That makes sense too. I saw an article just this past week - I'll read you a bit of it...

"Make America Great Again, Inc., the super PAC that spent more than \$450 million to elect Donald Trump this year, will host another "candlelight" meal with the president-elect next week at his Mar-a-plago Club in Palm Beach, FL. The price of entry for the event: "1,000,000 Per Person," according to a copy of the invite obtained by The Washington Post." (*from washingtonpost.com, Dec. 10, 2024*)

Yeah, I don't think the poor can have candlelight dinner with the president! I certainly can't hope for that! See? I was right - I'm not rich!

Yet the comparisons in the Sermon on the Mount say we're supposed to give up deals, we're supposed to give up making transactions - if someone wants your shirt, give him your coat too; if someone conscripts you for one mile, go an extra mile. Give to the one who begs from you (in other words, the one who has nothing to give you).

And then I thought, maybe I'm on to something, maybe this is really about how we relate to each other. Do we try to do a deal and make a good transaction or are we willing to give that up and do what we can - where we can - just because we can? And that reminded me of my friend, Tommy and the story about Tommy visiting Benny and the Deuce when they were in jail over Thanksgiving weekend one time. I'll share the story with you as it ties in with this whole issue of transactional behavior. [*read story*]

Now, some of you know Tommy, I've talked about him over the years but some of you haven't met him before so I'll give you a little background.

Tommy is an old friend of mine; I met him many years ago when I was doing some consulting work for a company over in Spencerville. Ever been to Spencerville? Sure you have - it's that little town on the way from here to there! It's a pretty little town with a nice town square and old streets lined with even older oak and maple trees.

I first met Tommy when he helped me with a flat tire, taking the tire over to Red's Garage without me even asking. He's thoughtful like that, at least he seems that way to me. Plenty other folks found him a little strange, maybe even slow, but I like him well enough.

I usually run into Tommy at the Buttermilk Cafe where Elvira watches over the comings and goings of the delightful assortment of characters any small town holds. You can see the whole square as you look out the front window where Elvira always displays a slice of pie along with a faded menu on a red checkerboard clothed table.

So, anyway, this time, we ran into Tommy while we were getting gas in Concordia! He said he was returning home after visiting his grandfather who lives in a Nursing Home outside Wichita. We had some time so we went to McDonald's, got some coffee - well, I had one of the fancy Mochas they make - and had a nice little visit. I asked how was everything down at the Buttermilk Cafe, how was Elvira and all her regulars; he said they were all fine although Elvira needed a little more help cleaning tables so he'd do that when she wasn't watching.

Then I asked him, "Did you go down to Walmart last week for the Black Friday sales to get some good bargains?"

Now, at this, Tommy did one of the things that made some people think he was kind of slow. He just stared for a moment like this was a totally new thought to him, like he was

from some other country or planet and had never heard of Walmart or Black Friday or even bargains! You couldn't really tell if he was looking at you or just slightly over your shoulder and it would seem like it would go on for a several minutes; everything was suspended in time. I'm sure it only lasted for seconds but it was disconcerting if you didn't know him.

Then he'd just smile and blink his eyes before speaking quietly.

"No, what would they have had down there to be thankful for that I haven't got right here? Oh, I went and got a turkey for Harvey to fix for the bridge people last week but 'Black Friday'? Seems like a kinda mean thing to call the day after Thanksgiving." he opined.

And then he smiled at me again. You know, I'd tell you what Tommy was wearing if I could ever remember it! His smile is what he wore best and what I remember the most.

We sipped some coffee, not saying anything, then I asked, "So, what were you thankful for this Thanksgiving, Tommy?"

"I'm thankful for Bennie and the Deuce!" he said positively.

He started out by telling me how Elvira at the Buttermilk Cafe closes for Thanksgiving - she visits her daughter's family on the other side of the state, I think primarily to see her two grandchildren, a boy and little sister. So Spencerville is pretty quiet. It's really quiet this year because Bennie and the Deuce are in the county lockup in Sheriff Hickersen's office. The Deuce is a smalltime hood, a conman and a no-good-Nick; Bennie is his sidekick. Bennie's not a bad dude, just kind of simple. He's tall and heavysset but really strong. No one's sure why he hangs around with the Deuce but there's some kind of symbiosis. The Deuce, who's always looking for an angle, uses Bennie all the time but still has some sort of loyalty to him.

But, like Tommy said, they're both in the slammer now. The Deuce got caught selling iPods that he and Bennie had 'picked up' somewhere, namely, off the Radio Shack in the little strip mall just west of town. They hadn't actually broken in, just happened to be around as the delivery truck was unloading! Due to the holidays, they couldn't be arraigned until next week so Sheriff Hickersen had to hold onto them. Thanksgiving in prison seemed like it would be a lonely affair.

Tommy said he chose to go visit Bennie and the Deuce. He didn't have anything to bring them except a can of cranberry sauce and a couple spoons. It was strange Tommy would even go because everyone assumed that that time Tommy's apartment was robbed, Bennie and the Deuce had something to do with it. But Tommy didn't judge them, or, maybe he forgave them; I don't know.

Of course, the Deuce wanted to know what was Tommy's angle - what was he going to get out of this visit? And if he wasn't getting anything then as far as the Deuce was concerned, he was just a chump. In today's transactional language, he's a loser.

But Bennie, normally pretty taciturn and quiet, told the Deuce to leave it alone; he was thankful for the cranberry sauce and for the visit. He told the Deuce, "Tommy never did nothing to us and he didn't have to do this. Thanks, Tommy."

Tommy was just glad to share with someone who needed a little love and compassion - that made it 'Thanksgiving' as far as he was concerned.

Another one of his over the shoulder gazes and then he spoke again. "And I'm thankful for you. And for Javier and Benny and Elvira and for my granddad and ... peanut butter!"

I laughed along with him saying, "Peanut Butter?! You like peanut butter?"

"No so much - but the squirrels sure do! It's their 'turkey and gravy' on Thanksgiving and they'll think it's a fine Christmas gift too. Them and the birds look so pretty against the trees and fallen leaves still on the ground, I can't imagine anything much more beautiful... well, except for the candles on Christmas Eve shining on the manger."

Tommy smiled and lifted his eyebrows conspiratorially at me and said, "If you look just right, you can see God all over the place."

After the quiet wore off, Tommy hopped up and said, "Gee, it was great to see you but I've gotta run, Red's got an old tire fixed for Elvira and I promised to get it back in time to put it on her car so she could drive to church tomorrow!"

With better clarity from the caffeine and greater hope from Tommy, we headed across the bridge and through the woods to go home, thankful all the way!

[pause]

You see? Tommy gave what he had, not to make a deal but, simply because he could. Like the Samaritan, Tommy gave up the transactional way of dealing in order to help someone else.

So maybe the reason that Jesus says to go sell everything and give to the poor is to detach ourselves from a transactional way of life. It's hard to think of giving away your hard earned stuff if you're not gonna get anything for it. Or - I don't know - maybe the rich man really doesn't think he's rich. You see? I've gone all around this text and still feel like I've got nothing. But, maybe that's the best position to be in?

[*pause*]

What do *you* think?

Amen.