

“Giving for a World of Inclusion”
Rev. Ben Heimach-Snipes
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Hebrew Bible Reading
Gospel Reading

Amos 5:6-15
Mark 10:17-31

As my wife, Abbi, and I prepare for our first child this Fall, one of the remaining projects we have is to write our Will. As is our custom in this country, we will write down our wishes about who in our families and perhaps wider communities - will inherit our stuff if we were to die. Who will receive our grey couch and carpet, who will receive our record player and music, who will receive our dishes, pots and pans, who will receive our bedroom furniture, and who will receive our newborn child - needing a lifetime of love and support. One of these things is not like the others!

Right now, our unborn child would inherit a lifetime of stuff, but a yet unnamed family member would inherit the deep and meaningful lifelong responsibility of raising this child in our absence. Inheritance can be quite a daunting thing to imagine - because it requires us to consider a world without us in it. In the receiving of inheritance, it requires us to imagine a world without our loved one in it.

And in the midst of this traumatic emotional experience, our society places a structure that propels wealth, propels privilege and inequality into the next generation. Kitchen tables are small change in the game of inheritance. There are also bank accounts, stock options, death benefits, and home mortgages that get dolled out in this country as part of some family's inheritance. And in the reading of a Will, we become coopted into a system of privileges and oppressions.

In the Palestinian communities that Jesus was visiting on his way to Jerusalem with the disciples, there was also a system of inheritance. Families passed on their wealth and their land to their children, perhaps providing a backdrop for this rich young man who questions Jesus in our scripture reading today.

In Jesus' context, there was no myth of “pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps.” If you had wealth, you either received it as inheritance or you took it from your community. Unlike our concept of “earning” your financial gain, first century philosophy would claim that any increase in your own wealth would mean a decrease in your neighbor's wealth. So the wealthy were considered to be taking or stealing from their community.

So inheriting your wealth would have been the only way that a rich young man could both be considered rich AND not be considered a thief or a fraud. Inheritance was this man's source of power and privilege in his community. And so it is important that he phrases his connection to God's kingdom - to heaven - to eternal life - in terms of inheritance. Every earthly thing that he desires - wealth, power, privilege, comfort - have all been provided to him by birth right. So this rich young man wants to know - what transactional actions are required to continue this inheritance of comfort and bliss forever? How can eternal life become his inheritance as well?

The question is complicated further by the Jewish connection to inheritance as well. As a first century Jew, Jesus as well as this rich young man, were inheritors of God's covenantal

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relationship with Abraham and Sarah - and before that, they were inheritors of God's covenantal relationship with Noah and his family. Their covenantal connection to God was passed down to them from generation to generation - a divine privilege bestowed on them by birth.

So Jesus' response turns a thousand years of tradition on its head. He lifts this divine privilege from the category of inheritance - bestowed only on the few chosen ones of Israel - and opens up covenantal relationship with God as a possibility for all people. And he does this in a most traumatic way for this rich young man.

Jesus tells the man - who claims to already follow all the commandments - that he must give away all of his inheritance - all the money, all the property, all the power and privilege, all the kitchen tables that were part of his birthright - give all this to the poor and then come follow Jesus - leading a life of noticeable poverty and physical insecurity - relying on the gifts of community for survival.

Mark says, "When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions."

It sounds like the reaction we might have in my family if you told us we had to give away all of our family furniture! Not just my mother's silverware and my grandmother's kitchen table, but also my great grandmother's fine china that has not been used in my lifetime! Our family might react similarly - with shock and going away grieving.

But Jesus is not just asking us to be willing to part with our favorite decorative tea set, Jesus is asking the rich young man, and all of us, to be willing to give up all of our power, privilege, and security to participate in the kingdom of God.

Notice that the rich young man asks about inheriting eternal life and Jesus responds by demanding his full participation in the kingdom of God. The terms to me have different connotations. Eternal life sounds infinite, static, contractual - like a gift or a construct of reality. The kingdom of God sounds like a process, a divine governance, a system of relationships and covenants that require participation and action and movement and discernment.

Where the rich young man - and let's face it, much of our Christian culture - requests a transaction that results in the benefit of eternal life, Jesus responds by inviting us into a covenantal relationship with God founded in grace that demands our full participation.

As Presbyterians, we know and believe that God is constantly providing us with Grace that frees us from the bondage of sin. This grace is a constant gift rather than a one time inheritance. And our joyful response to that grace is to participate in God's kingdom by working to create God's kingdom of love and justice in our relationships, in our families, in our workplaces, in our neighborhoods and our larger systems of government as well. Our connection to God's grace calls us into a life of creating God's kingdom all around us.

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Our participating in God's kingdom is costly. Every time we welcome someone into our community, we give away some of our earthly inheritance. Every time we help someone who is without, we are letting go of some of what we have been given. Every time we seek justice for those we love, we expend some of the life and resources that we have inherited. Every time we seek to undo oppression in our society, we must give more of ourselves. Participating in the kingdom of God, in the body of Christ is costly.

We can end up giving everything to participate in God's kingdom. Knowing the costs, we must be willing to support each other when the losses are high. Let us be each other's support in our own grief over what we have lost to participate in the body of Christ. Let us allow God's love to replenish what we have lost, and God's eternal grace to fill us when we are empty of our earthly inheritance. Let us bring God's love to life this day.

As a congregation that is committed to "Christ, Diversity and Mission," we seek to be welcoming and inclusive of all people. Your Session of Elders, with the movement of the Holy Spirit, has affirmed this calling of inclusion to extend to people of all sexual identities including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI). Just as we are working toward equity in the inclusion of all racial identities in the leadership and ministries of the church, we now seek to begin the work of inclusion and welcome for the LGBTQI community. Today we celebrate this first step of intention, knowing that the work of dialogue and education for our community around this topic of identity will come in time. Please join us in prayer as we begin this journey of inclusion together.

What are you willing to give to help empower a ministry of inclusion and welcome for all people? What are you willing to part with to provide a space for healing where there has been rejection?

Let us use the ever present gift of God's grace to help us share our own gifts in new ways this day.