

Love's Eights & Obstructions

Proper 23B: Mark 10.17-31

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A clergy friend once told a story about a dad who was out running errands with his daughter when a tiny voice from the car seat behind him said, "Daddy, how much do you love me?" The guy said, "Oh, sweetie, I love you very, very much. So much!" But the child wasn't satisfied and said, "I know, Daddy. But how much do you love me?" He said, "Well, I just told you. I love you more than anything in the whole world. Mommy is the only person I love as much as I love you." "No, Daddy," she said. "How *much* do you love me?"

The poor father was flummoxed. Until he got a flash of insight and said, "I love you ... EIGHT!" The little girl got quiet for a moment, and then said, "Wow!"

Has it ever occurred to you that the ways we communicate or measure love are fairly arbitrary and empty of meaning in themselves? But we still need them, don't we? Humans have been attempting to volley their love from one soul to another across the great divides between us from time immemorial. Whether it's a sonnet or a dozen roses or that silly term of endearment that no one but your beloved knows the meaning of, the means by which we communicate love have no more inherent value than the number eight. They might mean anything in a different context. But if they accomplish their task, we will look past them completely and see the person more clearly who used them to get their love through to us.

Even though the story of Jesus's encounter with the rich young man appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, mercifully, it only appears in our lectionary in Year B. So only once every three years does some poor preacher have to stand up here and try to explain how it is that Jesus doesn't really want you to sell everything you have and follow him and that rich folk like us really are going to be able to pass through that needle's eye, lumbering camels that we are.

I'm actually going to do my best not to tell you that I know Jesus isn't asking you to sell everything and give it to the poor. But I do want to read this story as a love story, and to see what happens when we do. Spoiler alert. If we do it right, I don't think it will be less demanding. Love never is, I'm afraid.

I think we need another frame for the story for a number of reasons. The first is that almost all of us read it with the mind of the rich young man. We're right with him. What do I need to do to inherit eternal life? Or what do I need to do to please God? Or what do I need to do to be a good Christian or citizen or parent or friend? After all these centuries and the havoc Jesus wreaked on religion as humans thought they knew it, we can still think of the gospel in ethical terms. What do I need to do to satisfy God's requirements and get the reward that awaits people who do?

But there's evidence for reading the story as a love story hidden in plain view. Mark, as you may well know, is the shortest of the gospels by a good bit. He's usually pushing the plot along urgently, which means that when he pauses to tell us the grass was green when the 5,000 were fed we should probably pay attention. Or when he interrupts Jesus's conversation with the rich man with stage directions and an emotion, these might not be superfluous details.

So, back to the story. The man runs up to Jesus as he's setting off on a journey and asks what he needs to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus says, "Well, you know the commandments, don't you?" And the man says, "You bet I do and I've kept them all my whole life." In other words, he's been on the performance based religion track from day one. The "Be a good person and God will reward you for being a good person" track which is still, all these centuries later, the approach to religion that gets the most press.

And if you charge ahead in the story, you're likely to read it as saying, "Yep. The project here is to be good. Really good. God has upped the ethical ante by about a bazillion. Now you've got to sell everything you own and give it to the poor to please God and inherit eternal life." And for 2,000 years, Christians have been reading this story and basically slinking away guiltily like the rich young man. None of us but St. Francis and a handful of fools in the centuries since actually take him at his word.

But Mark doesn't just charge ahead. He stops, and he tells us that after the man told Jesus how religious he'd been since his youth, Jesus looked at him. And loved him. And only then did he invite the man to turn and walk away from everything that he had acquired and everything that he trusted and follow Jesus into another way of being alive.

See, I really do think this is a love story. A sad one, about how hard we can make it for love, even God's love, to get through to us.

It sounds blasphemous, but I truly think that in his life, his teaching, his death and resurrection, Jesus was showing us that the religion that formed him from his youth, the Torah that shaped every aspect of Hebrew life, was his people's number eight. The practices and even the community that formed around them were not the point. They were meant to point beyond themselves to the God who loved them with a love their little minds could never fully comprehend. But when their attention got fixed on completing the requirements of the Law, as if that made them deserving, what was meant as a means to communicate God's love, became the very thing that got in its way.

Maybe it's a little like this. If Ardelle expressed her love for me next Valentine's Day by parking a new red Tesla with a bow on the hood in front of our house, I'd be thrilled. But, she'll be the first to tell you that it's far too easy to imagine our romantic candlelit dinner going cold while I pored over the owner's manual and fiddled with the car's dashboard gadgets far into the night. The thing meant to communicate love can actually get in the way of love when the beloved's attention is captured by the thing, rather than by the lover, can't it?

And, make no mistake. The Church can be what gets in the way of love too. William Vanstone grew up in the North of England during the Great Depression. His father was vicar of a parish that sat on the boundary between a desperately poor neighborhood and one that was relatively comfortable. Vanstone remembers regular dinner conversations as a child in which his mother would relay some desperate need in the community, and his father would go to parishioners who had the means to meet it. He decided to enter the priesthood himself, understanding the purpose of the church was to meet these essential needs in the community.

After ordination, he was assigned to an urban parish that would have been very much like his father's in the 1930s. But the world had changed after the War. The depression had ended, and the country's relative prosperity and new network of social services meant that many of the needs the Church used to meet were being met in other ways. He didn't wish people were poorer so the parish would still have a purpose. But the purpose changed. Now it was the spiritual center of the community, supporting and connecting ordinary

people in their everyday Christian lives through the sacraments and daily prayer and mutual service and much more. The Church still had an essential role, but it was very different from the Church that drew him to ordination.

But then, while he was happily engaged in this ministry, his bishop assigned him to a suburb where a new church was being built. The building would be completed in six months time. And as Vanstone began visiting what would be his new community, his idea of the Church's purpose was challenged again. No one in this new town seemed even to know a church was being built. Nor did they seem to have any need for one. They were polite, but disinterested as they tended their gardens, raised their children, made friends, and seemed to live happy, meaningful lives. There were no desperate needs, nor the need for a community center here. What was the Church's purpose now?

Maybe, he thought, the Church's chief purpose has always been simply to give glory to God. But he was too truthful to be satisfied with this notion for long. What kind of God's glory depends on the meager offerings of ordinary churchgoers, lovely as our choirs and our sermons and our potluck suppers may be to us? Vanstone began to fall into a deep depression, wondering whether the world or whether God had any need for the institution he so loved and had given his life to for all these years.

Then one day, two teenaged boys asked if he had any ideas about how they might keep themselves occupied during a short school break. Unthinkingly, he suggested they make a model of a waterfall they had all visited recently in Ireland out of stones and twigs and plaster and paint. The boys shrugged and decided to give it a go. To his surprise, Vanstone watched the boys become increasingly absorbed in the task over the next few days. So absorbed that they forgot to stop for meals as they gathered sticks from the gutter and debated what paint mixture looked most like moss. The model itself was anything but beautiful and the boys were hardly skilled sculptors. But the only word Vanstone had for what the boys were pouring into their silly project was love. And that's when all his visions of what the Church is to be turned entirely upside down. He saw that the Church is that model waterfall, whatever form it takes on in any place or time. The Church has no value in and of itself. Its value, like that of creation and of every human life, comes from the love of God that is poured out so completely into it. Not because it's made itself worthy of that love by completing some requirement. But because the God of love's nature is to love.

And that, beloved people, is why I think it's so essential to see that Jesus loved the rich man who came to him looking for eternal life one day. Not with a vague, I-love-everybody-because-it's-in-the-Second-Person-of-the-Trinity's-job-description kind of love. But a specific, personal love. He looked at this particular man, on this particular day, and loved him for who he in particular happened to be. Loved him before he'd done or not done anything Jesus would tell him to do. The love for him was alive already. All Jesus wanted was for this particular man to get rid of anything that kept him from seeing the divine love that was trained so intently on him. All he wants us be rid of is absolutely everything in our lives that keeps us from seeing that the same love is trained just as intently on each of us.