

The Gospel reading we just heard is a curious one. It has a couple of twists, a big speed bump, and some great opportunities to identify with the characters in this vignette by the writer of *Mark*.

Have you ever walked away from a great deal? Say, you're buying a new car – perhaps one you've wanted for a long, long time. Maybe if you're an ex jet-jockey, it might be a Corvette. Or, maybe it's that Cadillac Brougham. Or, the latest Ford 250 dualie. Or, if you're like me who loves classic-styled European sports cars, it could be a Porsche or an Audi. (Not that I'll ever get one at their prices, but I did say that this was a GREAT deal.)

Anyway, you've saved up the money, you go down to the dealership, you go up to the salesman and tell him (it's always a guy at the car dealerships) that you want to buy your dream car, that you've got the cash; "I'm ready for this great deal; just let me have the keys, please." And, the salesman says something like, "That's great!" "Now all you have to do is... "watch this hour-long video, and put down an additional ½ the full-sale price in escrow for the restocking fee should you decide that you really don't want the car, and, oh, by the way, you have to work for us for 3 years, giving all your compensation above living expenses to the poor, and then you can get this great deal we're offering this week, and this week only!"

Say what???

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Just what kind of deal is this? If this really happened, it would be easy to walk away. I daresay most of us would be running out of that dealership, calling the SCC, our state senator, and the Better Business Bureau – maybe all at the same time!

But, that's not exactly what happened in our story from *the Gospel According to Mark*. A man approaches Jesus with great respect; we could even say, "with considerable reverence." "Holy Teacher," the

man says, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” First, we don't know anything about this person. Oh sure, if you've read the *Gospel According to Matthew*, you'd probably recognize the parallel story where *Matthew* (19:16-22) describes the man as young – but that comes at the very end of the story. And, in the other parallel found in *Luke* (18:18-23), the man is called a ruler. But here in our story, the writer of *Mark's* version of the Gospel simply calls this person a man.

This might make it easier for us to identify with this person. He's just a man, as far as we know, for now. Just some ordinary person who comes up to Jesus and asks a question. So, for the moment, I ask each of you here this morning to put yourself in the place of this person who respectfully approached Jesus and who asked THE QUESTION.

You know you want to, ask Jesus the same question this man asked. It's not an uncommon question. Wasn't then, and isn't now. In fact, whether we voice it as directly as this man did, or couch it in some

Walking Away From the Deal

other terms, such as, “Is there really a heaven?” or, a bit more directly, “How do I get to heaven?” or, maybe try to deflect away from your self, asking, “Will my father, mother, brother, sister, husband, wife, aunt, uncle, cousin, daughter, son, grandson, granddaughter, even great-grandkids, be saved?”

Because, you see, we are so like this person in *Mark's* story. We want to know, to have that assurance, to possess that certainty that we will have eternal life.

And, aren't we like that man who when told by Jesus what it would take to receive eternal life more than likely to give assurances? We know we've been good (or at least some of us think we've always been good). Never breaking a rule. Always obeying the speed limit. Never talking back to our parents or others in authority. Never telling fibs to get out of trouble or to get someone else out. Always keeping our promises. Always honoring our relationships. So, we give the correct answer, “Teacher, I have kept all these things since my youth.”

Okay, let's back track a minute here. Remember how I said that *Matthew* called this guy young? And, perhaps some of you may know that this story is often referred to as "the rich young ruler?" That's what Heinrich Hoffman named his painting that hangs at Riverside Church in New York City, the painting, done in 1889, shows a young man in his finery talking to Jesus who points to a poor person almost lost in the shadows of the background. The young man is looking

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away from Jesus, down at the ground with a sorrowful face. But, logic says, if this man has kept all the Jewish commandments since his youth; then how can we call him young? Maybe, not influenced by Hoffman's painting, there is a good reason for many of us to identify with him.

Back to the story. Like the person, we can reasonably say that we, too, have followed the rules. Go to church every Sunday. Attend or teach Sunday School. Sing in the choir. Serve on a committee, or be involved with or participate in mission activities, even be at Presbytery meetings every year! We don't lie or steal. We treat others with respect and don't defraud anyone; unlike certain financiers whose last names start with the letter "M".

So, the ticket's punched. We're in like Flynn. We've got the direct line. No problems. No delays. The fix is in. The deal is set. And, then... Jesus throws the hanging curve ball. "You lack one thing..."

Upon hearing those words, we walk away from the deal, just like the man did. Because, like this person, we, too, have a lot of possessions. Although not a new statistic, it is a fact that middle-class Americans are richer than 95% of all Christians living on this planet. We know we have one of the highest standards of living in the world. We've carefully built that up. We are proud of that fact. And, like the man in our gospel lesson this morning, we are very reluctant to give it up. So, like the man, we walk away from the deal.

So, how is this Good News? What positive lesson can we take from all this? Let me direct you to a couple of things – the first comes from Will Willimon who used to be chaplain at Duke University. Now retired, Bishop Willimon tells the story of a time he was holding Bible Study for some college students, and they were looking at this passage. Asking what they made of the story, one student asked if Jesus had ever met the man before. “Why do you ask,” Dr. Willimon queried back. “Because Jesus seems to have a lot of faith in him. “He demands something risky, radical of the man.” The student went on to “wonder if Jesus knew this man had a gift for risky, radical response.” He then explained that “[i]n his experience, a professor only demands the best from students [whom] the professor thinks are the smartest, best students... The Duke student wondered “what there was about this man that made Jesus have so much faith that [the man] could really be a disciple,” and give away all his possessions.

Hmmm... There's food for thought. Maybe we might look at ourselves to see if there is something in us that keeps us from truly following Him. What keeps us from letting it all go, breaking free, and letting our lives be completely directed by God's love and plan and work?

The second point comes out of the text itself. Jesus tells His disciples that it is God who does all these things. No merit on our part. Nothing that we do to fulfill some law or set of rules; nothing will bring us

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salvation and hence eternal life. Rather, it is God's grace, a gift of love to which we are called to respond – “Come, follow Me!”

Are we willing to follow Jesus? Are we ready to follow Jesus? To go wherever He calls? Wherever He directs? To give up, if necessary, all that we have to help others experience God's love, to invite them into God's kingdom and to have eternal life? Let us not walk away from this deal.

Let us pray:

Holy and gracious God, You call us out of our comfort zones. You shed light on the things, possessions, principles, and pride to which we cling so tenaciously that keep us from completely following Your Son into Your kingdom. We always want what we believe is the easy route. We even turn away from Your gracious invitation to join in the work of Your kingdom. We ask Your forgiveness and ask for strength that comes through the work of the Holy Spirit. Take away our seemingly insatiable material desires, our pride in possessions, our unwillingness to commit wholly to You, and fill us with Your Spirit, love, faith, courage, and hope. We ask these things in the name of Your Son, Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen