

Seeking
Mark 10:17-31
First Presbyterian, Luling
October 10, 2021

There's a stereotype about shopping. Namely, that women love to shop and men detest it, that women could shop til they drop, and men see no point in it beyond getting the essentials and bringing them directly home. It's more than a stereotype, actually. People have done research on this, drawn little diagrams tracking men's and women's journeys through department stores, timed how long each gender stays in a particular store, kept track of their respective complaints about service, and of course, tried to figure out how they can maximize men's and women's shopping habits in order to make the most money.

What they have found in the research is that the majority of men go to a store seeking a definite number of specific items, walk straight to them, buy them, and leave.

Women, on the other hand, and again this is according to both the stereotype and the research, set out to the store seeking a particular item or two, which they may or may not return home with. They peruse each aisle leisurely, stopping when something catches their eye, try on various things, put some of them back, pick up a few others, try them on again, go and look at something else entirely, then meander their way to the checkout, browsing all along the way. Not surprisingly, women end up spending much more time shopping.

I can't say that I conform entirely to this stereotype. I never have really enjoyed shopping, and the pandemic has only made that worse. Curbside pickup at HEB has become my favorite shopping activity. You may notice it involves no shopping at all. Andy, on the other hand, kind of enjoys going to HEB and browsing around, getting what he calls "good stuff" that HEB "has for sale," as if I won't notice that there's a difference between "for sale" and "on sale."

But there is something to the stereotype. One year I volunteered at the book fair at the elementary school. Over and over, a boy would come in, walk straight to the book he wanted, walk straight to the cash register, and go back to class, apparently unaware of the out-of-class freedom he could have enjoyed had he only browsed a bit. A girl would come in, examine every shelf and every table, come over and ask me how much money she had and how much the book cost, put a book up and put it down, and repeat the whole process before finally deciding which book she wanted. It got to be pretty comical, how they conformed

to the stereotype, at ages 5 or 6.

I think each of us, whether we “get” to go shopping, or “have” to go shopping, have at times fallen into both categories. Sometimes we go seeking a particular item, procure it, and return home. And sometimes we go seeking...something, we may not even know what. Sometimes it's just the pleasure we get from buying something new, sometimes it's a relief from boredom, sometimes it's a way to spend time with people we love, sometimes we're just restless, sometimes we're using shopping to fulfill a deeper need, a deeper seeking, a different kind of longing all together.

I think it was that kind of deeper need and seeking and longing that brought the man to Jesus in our gospel reading this morning. There's nothing to suggest that he isn't coming as a sincere seeker, a really good and obedient man, who has kept the commandments and is seeking something more. Jesus receives him as if he is sincere, not trying to trick Jesus as some other people did. The question that the man asks—and remember that we don't yet know he is rich—the question that the man asks is, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” The conversation that follows reveals that he is a faithful man, obedient to the commandments, and that he has many possessions. Indeed, it seems that he is possessed by his possessions, for he can't do as Jesus asks, really as Jesus *commands* him to do, to “go, sell what he owns and give the money to the poor and come follow him.”

He must, though, know that there is *something* missing in his life, something that his possessions have not been able to fulfill, something that he thinks Jesus can tell him how to get. Listen carefully to his question again, “what must *I do* to *inherit* eternal life?” He thinks that eternal life is what he is seeking, and he thinks that he can *do* something to get it. He realizes it's more complicated than that, because he uses the word “inherit.” An inheritance is not something you get yourself, but something that someone else gives. But he still thinks that there's something he has to do, and it seems like he's willing to do it, to get what he is seeking. Until he hears what it is, that is. Then, he can't do it, he can't do what it takes, he can't be unpossessed by his possessions. And he goes away shocked and grieving. His seeking was genuine. I imagine his seeking was more like a woman going shopping, not sure exactly what it is he is seeking, looking around, I imagine that he'd been looking for a while when he heard of Jesus and stopped to see what he was all about. I wonder, a lot, whatever became of him. We don't hear from him again.

I wonder what became of him, because I know him. I am him. Maybe you

are him. There are possessions that possess me. There are people that possess me. There are things that possess me that hinder me from the “something more” that I am seeking. Sometimes those possessions are easy to identify. And sometimes they hold on to me so tightly, and I hold on to them so tightly, that I don't even know the things that are hindering me from my seeking.

After the rich man goes away in his grief, Jesus has a more general remark about rich people--“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.” Jesus has basically said it's impossible. The disciples are shocked, astounded, confused. Because in their culture, and in many corners of our culture, to be rich is to be seen as being especially blessed by God. Riches are a sign of God's favor. Listen to some famous tv preachers and you'll hear the very same things. Jesus says the opposite. It's impossible for rich people to enter the kingdom of heaven. The disciples ask him what he means, and then we begin to get a glimmer of good news.

“For mortals it is impossible,” says Jesus, “but not for God; for God all things are possible.” Goodness knows, we are all rich, when we are compared to the rest of the world. Goodness knows, we are all possessed by our possessions, by our families, by our histories, by so many things that we treasure, material and not. Goodness knows, we pass by the poor without seeing them, we ignore the injustices that they suffer. Goodness knows we really just do not want to sell all we have and give it to the poor. And goodness knows that we have tried to wiggle our way out of understanding Jesus's words, ever since they were spoken. And goodness knows, there have been times that we too turned away from Jesus, grieving at our inability to follow him wholeheartedly.

Then we thank God for the impossibility of doing what Jesus asks. We thank God for the possibilities that grace provides us. We seek that which can only be received as a gift. We seek the gift of grace, we seek the Kingdom, we seek eternal life as an impossibility that is only possible with God. We seek as if we are on a direct mission, and we seek as we browse around. St. Augustine described it well with these words: “Our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” Thanks be to God. Amen.