

As Jesus went out into the street, a man came running up, greeted Him with great reverence, and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said, "Why are you calling Me good? No one is good, only God. You know the commandments: Don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't lie, don't cheat, honor your father and mother." He said, "Teacher, I have - from my youth - kept them all!" Jesus look him hard in the eye - and loved him!

Jesus said, "There's one thing left. God sell whatever you own and give it to the poor. All your wealth will then be heavenly wealth. And come follow Me." The man's face clouded over. This was the last thing he expected to hear, and he walked off with a heavy heart. He was holding on tight to a lot of things, and not about to let go.

Looking at His disciples, Jesus said, "Do you have any idea how difficult it is for people who 'have it all' to enter God's kingdom?" The disciples couldn't believe what they were hearing, but Jesus kept on: "You can't imagine how difficult. I'd say it's easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for the rich to get into God's kingdom."

That set the disciples back on their heels. "Then who has any chance at all?" they asked. Jesus was blunt: "No chance at all if you think you can pull it off by yourself. Every chance in the world if you let God do it."

Peter tried another angle: "We left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Mark My words, no one who sacrifices house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children, land - whatever - because of Me and the Message will lose out. They'll get it all back, but multiplied many times in homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and land - but also in troubles. Then the bonus of eternal life! This is once again the Great Reversal: Many who are first will end up last, and the last first."

*[Begin by singing "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know."]*

There is an old dessert that my mom made, and so did Ralph's mom, called "pineapple upside down cake." I don't think it's popular anymore... I don't think I've ever seen it on a restaurant menu. It's called "upside down" cake because the really good stuff, the pineapple rings, the cherries, and the butter and brown sugar, is put in the bottom of the cake pan. After the cake is baked it's turned upside down and then all the good stuff is on the top, where frosting usually is (which is the best part of the cake.)

Jesus said the kingdom of God is like pineapple upside down cake. That is, if His mother had made it, He would have said it, and used it as a sermon illustration. Much of what Jesus said, and how He lived, turned world upside down.

Last week our gospel lesson was also from Mark; Jesus' words to the Pharisees and to His closest friends about relationships in the Kingdom of God: divorce, remarriage, and the sacred worth of all people. It can be discomfiting, and painful, to have our place in the world turned upside down. Jesus was not popular with the Scribes and Pharisees, keepers of the Law of Moses, and "place-holders" of Jewish life, of everything that created order and holiness in Jewish life, because He turned the world they knew upside down.

When we are little kids we learn to sing "Jesus Loves Me" and that's the basis of our religious understanding: that we are loved, dearly and totally, loved by God. As we

grow older we learn the Ten Commandments, and our theological understanding grows to include God's expectations of how we live. And then cultural understanding influences and informs us: rules and morals and "place-holding" (that is, who belongs, and who doesn't; who's on the inside, and who's on the outside) begins to shape us. I don't know if this is true for you... but at times I've wandered far away from that knowing-with-everything-in-me that I had as a child, that Jesus loves me.

It was hard to preach last week's sermon about divorce, remarriage, and Kingdom relationships. I would like to preach (and I'd like to read) a gospel that doesn't offend anyone, that makes all of us feel comfortable, and happy, and assured of being in the right place. I think many people walk away from the bible because there's so much in it that's confusing and conflicting, and that makes no sense to postmodern minds and hearts. I love this book [hold up the bible.] It's shaped me, and shown me who I am, and who God is. I understand the bible to be the inspired word of God that also includes stories, poetry, history, and a look into the ancient mind and heart articulating the nature of God and the universe. I love the bible, but I don't worship it. I worship Jesus, whom, the apostle John said, is the Living Word of God.

As we heard last week, Jesus said - about relationships in the Kingdom of God - there is no brokenness. There is no divorce. There is no patriarchy (where power and authority in family and society belongs to men rather than to everyone.) There is no hierarchy (where some classes of people have more status and importance than others.) In God's Kingdom, all people are loved and valued by God. All marriage and covenant relationships are sacred. All men, and women, and children, are of equal importance. (But this isn't heaven. This isn't yet the completed Kingdom of God; there is brokenness in some of our relationships. God's Holy Spirit invites us to participate in the building and bringing about the Kingdom of God, so sometimes with God's help, we are able to repair and heal some of those relationships. But brokenness exists in this fallen world. And with God's help, because of God's love and mercy for us, we don't need to judge ourselves and others for that.)

In my little Ft. Jones United Methodist Church, one Communion Sunday I said that someday we will all sit, even our enemies, will sit together at the Lord's banquet table. After worship a 90 year old retired pastor named Carl Schwartzberg said to me, "Marylee. You got it wrong about our enemies sitting with us at that heavenly banquet." (Carl smiled at me. And because I knew he loved me, I listened to him.) Carl said, "Marylee, there will be no enemies at the Lord's Table because *in God's Kingdom there are no enemies!*" Carl overturned my image of God's Kingdom because I was preaching from this side; I was imagining what it looks like from this side. But in the Kingdom of God there are no enemies. No outsiders. No broken relationships.

Jesus overturned tables, and He turned upside down long-held and cherished beliefs in keeping rules and Laws - having order and right knowledge of God - as the way to know God, and to please God. I think it's okay if I speak for all of us here that there's no way any of us can perfectly keep the Ten Commandments. We can't live by rules alone. We can't live under the Law. So Jesus came to show us a better way.

Mark shows us three beautiful little vignettes of Jesus teaching in today's gospel lesson. Mark often told three stories together, which one of my seminary professors

said, was like a theological sandwich... you need to pay attention to the story on either side and special attention to the "filling," the story in the middle.

The first vignette (these stories are almost tableaux where there is little or no movement, but within the scene a dramatic and meaningful story is told) is of a young man who falls on his knees before Jesus and asks what he can do to inherit eternal life. Remember, now, that just before this young man approached Him, Jesus had been tested by the Pharisees about marriage according to the Law of Moses. It seems from Jesus' strange response ("Why do you call *Me* good? No one is good but God") that He might have seen this question as another test. Nevertheless Jesus and the young man have a heart-to-heart in the street, and Jesus clearly sees who this man is, and loves him. Then Jesus tests the man. "Go sell what you have, and give to the poor, and then come, follow Me." And the man goes away, sad, because, Mark tells us, "He was holding on tight to a lot of things and not about to let go."

In the second vignette, Jesus is having a private conversation with the disciples. Again He turns upside down their cultural understanding (and still today this is our understanding) that wealth is a reward, a sign of God's favor. Jesus used humor and hyperbole as teaching tools. He tells the disciples, "I'd say it's easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for the rich to get into God's kingdom." Eugene Peterson's Message translation is so helpful in understanding the heart of this teaching. It doesn't say that the man had great wealth, otherwise that would let us off the hook, because most of us don't have great wealth. So then Jesus' teaching about the almost-impossibility of anyone entering the Kingdom of God wouldn't apply to us. We don't have to worry that we couldn't squeeze through the eye of a needle. But the Message tells us, "The man was holding on tight to a lot of things and not about to let go." And this hits home for all of us. We are all holding onto something tightly, that is more important to us than following Jesus. We all hold onto things (not just possessions) that are more valuable to us than merciful, welcoming, inclusive love, which Jesus taught us, is the better way.

Master-teacher Jesus now connects these teaching moments for the disciples. Remember in the first vignette that the young man asked Jesus this strange question: "What must I do to *inherit* eternal life?" To inherit something is to receive it by succession; to receive it as a right, as an heir would be rightfully in line to inherit property or wealth. Maybe if the young man had followed Jesus, he would have heard this teaching that was instead saved for the disciples (and for us): that by our own doing... none of us can enter the Kingdom of God. We can only enter into the Kingdom, we can only be saved, by the love and mercy of God. Everything, Jesus says, is possible with God.

This last vignette is another heart-to-heart conversation with Jesus. Peter reminds Jesus how much he and the other disciples have left behind to follow Him. Jesus' response to Peter is that everything Peter - and all of us - give up to follow Jesus will be given back to us a hundred times over. Jesus is not talking about the "prosperity gospel" that sells so much Sunday morning airtime. The prosperity gospel, especially popular on tv, says that when we do good, and are good, we can expect more good in return than we can imagine. Because God wants us to be prosperous! (That's not a message anywhere in the gospels.)

Instead Jesus tells the disciples an insider tip about love. It is self-emptying; it lets go of needing anything in return; it trusts God always. Jesus emptied Himself of His divinity, and became one of us. Jesus let go of everything, even His life, to be for us God-in-the-flesh. Jesus trusted God with the outcome, which is resurrection-life.

Jesus saw into Peter's boastful words, and through Peter's vulnerability and fear, and into his heart. Peter was asking Jesus, as we all do at some time or another on the spiritual journey, "Is this worth it? Is it worth the work and discipline and persistence it takes to love God with *everything* I have and am, and to love my neighbor as much as I love myself?" And like the young man who'd fallen on his knees before Jesus, Jesus looked at Peter, and loved him. (Jesus was a human being and He understands us. And He looks at you - He sees you - through eyes filled with love and compassion.) Jesus then tells Peter that everything Peter has sacrificed will be made up to him. This is another way of saying that when we give ourselves away in love it comes back in ways we can't imagine.

In the Kingdom of God, the first will be last, and the last will be first. This is pineapple upside down cake theology. All the good stuff is offered first: love, welcome, compassion, forgiveness, service, healing. And it all comes back to us (with cherries, and caramelized pineapple rings and dripping brown sugar glaze) in ways we can't imagine.

The song, "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know" connects last week's gospel with this week's. How tempting, and how human it is, to judge others from our own perspective and understanding of right living and following the rules. Jesus often turned the rules and the Law upside down in order to show a better way for us to live. God's way. The way of love.

Twice in these little vignettes from Mark's gospel Jesus has a heart-to-heart with someone. Here is an invitation for us... to let Jesus into our hearts, to soften our hearts, to heal our hearts, to bring us back to what we innately knew as children with everything in us - and it's all we need to know - that Jesus loves us.