

“For God All Things Are Possible”

Job 23: 1-9, Mark 10: 13-31

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There’s a children’s story called Hope for the Flowers that Tom Sine tells in his adult book Why Settle for More and Miss the Best?

“The story’s about an ambitious caterpillar named Stripe who decided to climb a mountain—a huge mountain of caterpillars, all climbing over one another, trying to get to the top. As Stripe plunged into the pile and began his ascent, he asked, ‘What’s at the top?’ Another climber responded, ‘No one knows, but it must be awfully good because everybody’s rushing there.’

“Stripe soon found that moving up the mountain was a struggle. He was pushed and kicked and stepped on from every direction. It was climb or be climbed. But Stripe disciplined himself neither to feel nor be distracted as he continued to push his way up. ‘Don’t blame me if you don’t succeed! It’s a tough life. Just make up your mind,’ he yelled to any complainers.

“Finally Stripe neared the top of this humongous mountain of caterpillars. And as he looked ahead, he saw something disturbing—a tremendous pressure and shaking was sending many at the top crashing to their death below.

“Stripe felt awful with this new knowledge. The mystery of the pillar was clearing—he now knew what

always must happen on the pillar. Frustration surged through Stripe.

“But as he agreed that this was the only way up he heard a tiny whisper from the top: ‘There’s nothing here at all!’ It was answered by another: ‘Quiet fool! They’ll hear you down the pillar. We are where they want to be. That’s what’s here.’

“Stripe felt frozen. To be so high and not be high at all. It only looked good from the bottom.”

The “Gotta Have It!” attitude of Stripe and the other caterpillars is familiar to us—not just from children’s books, but also from real life. And this attitude is apparently not a new one. It’s not unique to Americans (although we do seem to have a corner on the market) or unique to the 21st century. As we read our scripture lesson for this morning we see that Stripe’s problem is a universal one. People throughout history have been trying to climb their way to the top—usually through money and power and possessions—and usually at the expense of others on the pillar. And people throughout history have arrived at the top only to find as Stripe did that “It only looked good from the bottom.” As Tom Sine put it, people tend to “Settle for more and miss the best.”

The man in our story from the Gospel of Mark has climbed his own mountain only to discover that something is still missing in his life. Mark tells us he is rich. The man tells Jesus that he has obeyed all the commandments from his youth. He’s at the top of the pile through hard work or good luck or both, yet there’s something missing.

The man comes to Jesus with a spirit of great sincerity, I believe. He comes showing great respect for

Jesus and asks: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”
What must I do to “get saved”? What must I do to secure my ticket to heaven?

The man is looking for a formula. “Do thus and so for yourself, by yourself and you’re set. Imagine him—palm pilot in hand, ready to take notes, as if he were kneeling at the feet of a business guru awaiting hot tips on a business venture. The rich man sees “inheriting eternal life” as something to accomplish, something to master, a do-it-yourself project.

When Jesus is encountered by the rich man he is himself “setting out on a journey.” He is not setting out for an exotic vacation, a cruise or Disneyland. He is setting out for Jerusalem. . . . to die. Jesus already knows the price he will pay for the rich man’s eternal life—for his ticket to heaven.

Jesus first engages the rich man in a conversation about goodness. Trying to lay the groundwork of grace, Jesus proposes that only God is good. Then, Jesus reminds the man of the 10 Commandments.

The rich man replies: “Got those covered.” “No problem. Haven’t killed anyone. Haven’t slept with anybody I wasn’t supposed to sleep with. Haven’t lied. Don’t steal. Paid everything I owe on my taxes. Paid my servants what I owed them. I visit Mom and Dad at the nursing home every day.” Check, check, check. Got those covered. No problem.

Jesus, knowing full well the heart, mind, motives and actions of this man and all men and women must have been tempted to laugh . . . or perhaps to cry—at least shake his

head in amazement. Instead Jesus “looked at him and loved him.”

Then Jesus gives the man the answer to his question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“Follow me,” Jesus says in essence. And here’s what it will take for you to follow me, to trust me, to know that your salvation is a gift, not something you earn, not something you accomplish, not something you check off on your list. You must go, sell what you own, give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, then come, follow me.

What? You’ve got to be kidding! I give 10 percent of what I make. I give extra to all those special offerings in all those special little envelopes. I volunteer my time for a gazillion activities and ministries. Once I dressed like a clown for sick children. I don’t cuss, drink or do drugs. Could we go over the part about me following all the commandments from my youth? Could we go over all that again?

And Jesus looked at him and loved him. I’m your ticket to heaven. Come, follow me.

“But, did I mention that I have had perfect attendance at Sunday School for 20 years straight—I have this string of pins to prove it,” said the rich man.

“Ssssh. Go, sell what you own, give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, then, come follow me,” Jesus said.

Jesus looked at the rich man and loved him. The rich man went away grieving.

“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.”

The disciples, having heard Jesus’ words, ask a good question: “Then who can be saved?” If it’s so hard to enter the kingdom of God—even for people who’ve done lots of good things—then who can be saved? I mean, if someone who has kept the commandments and helped others can’t get a ticket to heaven, then who can?

“For mortals it is impossible, but not for God, for God all things are possible.”

We also recall Jesus’ words: “Let the little children come to me, do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

Receive as child? Go, sell all you have, give it to the poor, follow me? For God, all things are possible?

Lamar Williamson, in his commentary on Mark says this: “Entrance to the kingdom of God, or eternal life or salvation, so far from being easy, demands our best obedience and all we have. Yet all we can do is not enough to achieve the life we seek. Such life and wholeness is possible only for God and can receive it only as a gift. Jesus’ blessing of the children can be read as cheap grace. Jesus’ call to the rich man can be read as works salvation. Jesus’ teaching to disciples draws gift and demand together in a paradox that is astonishing and true” (Mark, Interpretation Commentary, p. 185).

It is a paradox. Our ticket to heaven is free, yet it costs us everything. Salvation is a free gift. Discipleship is

a costly journey. To sort all of this out is impossible—at least for mortals. But with God, all things are possible.

I am reminded of Stripe and his ascent up the mound of caterpillars. As he gets to the top he discovers what many of us have discovered—there's nothing there. There's still something missing. And then we are reminded of Jesus' concluding comments in this passage. The view from the bottom is better than the view from the top. "But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first. In the end, Jesus concludes that being at the top is not the answer. Servanthood is. Letting go of anything that encumbers us in following Jesus is the answer. Believing you can work your way to the top—to heaven—is not the answer. Receiving God's salvation as a gift is the answer. Paradoxical, yes. But with God, all things are possible.