

Several Sundays ago, I preached a sermon about wealth that involved some pretty massive numbers. We talked about piles of money the size of football fields and Scrooge McDuck swimming around in his pool of gold coins. I kinda got on a rant about money and unequal wealth distribution. So coming into this Sunday, the egalitarian in me was licking its chops. I mean, that Gospel reading, right? We all know this story. A rich man comes to Jesus and says he's done everything right, and then Jesus says, great! Now give away everything you've got, and then maybe, *maybe* you'll have a shot at squeezing your camel through the eye of a needle. Except, that's not quite how the story goes.

At Bible Study last week, we talked a little bit about the structure of our eyes. Seemed like a perfectly reasonable thing to talk about at the time. This is really cool. Our eyes have two kinds of photoreceptors, rods and cones. Rods are basically either on or off, white or black. Rods cannot pick up color. But because they're so simple, they do pick up movement really well. Cones are the color receptors but they're a tiny bit slower. So here's where it gets cool. Cones are clustered mostly around the center of our vision, so, when you're looking straight ahead and seeing a stained glass window or a preacher on a tangent or whatever, it's mostly the cones doing the work. But the rods are spread around, almost entirely in your peripheral vision. They're on the lookout for movement. Neat, right? It gets cooler. Remember, rods cannot pick up color. They're either on or off, light or dark. There aren't many cones - the color receptors - in our periphery at all. So, while we can see color looking straight ahead, our ability to actually sense color in the periphery is extremely limited. Rods are doing most of the work there, and cones are barely present. In other words, our eyes can't actually see much color in the periphery at all. It's black and white! Our brains fill in the gaps to give it color. So, like, looking out at the pews, I can see all sorts of color straight ahead, but as my field of vision expands to the sides, my brain knows to fill in the blue of the pew cushions but my eyes can't actually see it! Crazy, right? It's like if you've ever tried to paint-to-fill in MS Paint, and everything within a border ends up the same color. But just like that paint-to-fill tool on the computer, our brains can make mistakes. Sometimes our brain assumes a color continues on when it really doesn't. It's a cerebral shortcut, and it's good enough most of the time.

Eyes and brains are cool and understanding how they work can really get me to geeking out, but what does all that have to do with anything today? Good question. I'm glad you asked. When we hear or even read Bible stories that are from the greatest hits section, we know how the stories go, and we know them so well that we often miss the details. Added to this, we typically have two or three or four retellings of the same event, so we paint-to-fill Mark's account with Matthew's or Luke's or John's or even sometimes Paul's. And just like rods and cones and brains, we take the cerebral shortcut. Most of the time, that's just fine. But sometimes that shortcut leads to mistakes. And this time around, it's mighty easy to paint-to-fill Mark's account (and Matthew's, too, for what it's worth) with Luke's, and in so doing, we miss something. See, in Luke's telling of this story, the man who comes to Jesus that has done everything right -- purportedly -- is a ruler. He isn't explicitly named as rich, but I mean, he's a ruler so he's gotta be. And then the scene unfolds, he leaves dejected, and Jesus talks about how hard it is for rich people to get to heaven. Not impossible, for what it's worth, but tough. But Mark and Matthew both tell it slightly differently, differently enough to matter. The man who comes to Jesus - runs up to him and drops to his knees, mind you - is just a man. He's got a lot of stuff, but if you ever saw my aunt's barn, you'd know that having a lot of stuff doesn't necessarily mean you've got piles of money best delivered by forklift. My aunt's barn was mostly junk that some theoretical collector somewhere might someday want, a theoretical collector that typically never materialized. We've heard this story of the man coming to Jesus enough that we paint-to-fill him as rich, and then if I'm honest, the rest of the story makes me

feel really good about rich people getting what's due to them in a way that I'm not super proud of. Take that, plutocrat.

But I don't think that's quite what's going on. I mean, yes, Jesus will go on to say how hard it is for the wealthy to make it into heaven, likely a commentary on the specific kinds of temptations the wealthy deal with and the many things they have in their sights that the rest of us don't. Jesus does talk about that in the second part, but I don't think it's dependent on the first part. In the first part of the story, what we see is a faithful man asking for guidance. He upholds the commandments, all of them, which is no small feat, he recognizes Jesus as a Good Teacher, a title so accurate it makes Jesus uncomfortable, and he asks Jesus what more he can do to make sure he's living right and, yes, get his reward in heaven. And Jesus sort of thinks through, "well, he's ticked all these boxes, what's the next step?" And what he tells the man to do next is hard. But I don't think it's hard because the guy is wealthy or has a barn full of junk. It's hard because it's security. After all the wildness of a day or the stress that life throws at you, what a comfort it is to go home. And in that home, to close the world out and sit and just be with those things that bring you comfort. Jesus says, "get rid of all that, give the proceeds to the poor, and follow me."

To my eye, I see this as a question of trust and prioritizing focus, not an issue of wealth, or at least, not solely of wealth. Think of all the things Jesus is asking him to give up beyond just possessions. Tied to those things are memories. Maybe that house was built by the man's father, now deceased. Maybe the junk in the barn came from grandma's antique store. Maybe a trinket here or some tchotchke there were gifts from loved ones, a lover now gone, or a child grown old. You don't have to be a rich ruler to feel the pain of what Jesus asks. If the man were to do what Jesus asked, it would mean placing all of his trust in a single place, no comforting stuff, no beat-up old chair, no reliable roof over his head. Just Jesus and a complete and total faith that he will provide. The thing is, I think Mark's telling of this applies to everyone across the spectrum of wealth. Every single one of us has something we treasure. Some of us have more things we treasure, some have very few, but we all have something. It may be as simple as the shirt on your back, or it may be an exorbitant spaceship that'll take you to the heavens. But we all have something. For me, I thought it was just one or two things, but the more I've thought about it, the bigger my stack of "indispensable" things becomes. I can't imagine life without them, or worse, I can. How miserable would life be without the simple pleasures, the creature comforts, the familiar coffee mug, the cutting of a plant passed down through generations, the goofy dog panting at my side. And that's the hook. Because in the framework of the man on his knees begging the Good Teacher for direction, all he can see is how miserable life would be without those things, and he misses how extraordinary it could be even if the only thing he had was Jesus. All he can imagine is what he would lose. He's unable to see what he could gain.

Now, that egalitarian in me would have loved to say just how silly this man is that he can't get rid of all his stuff throwing his religious priorities out of whack. And isn't it great to see Jesus rub the top 0.01 percent's noses in the dirt? But I don't think today's text really bears that out. Instead, it's a challenge to all of us to reset our priorities, to replace those things in the center of our vision with Christ. And all those sermons over the past few weeks you've heard about love, well, this one fits in with that theme, too. Because there's a shift here from love of stuff - and even of the things they represent - to a refocused love of God, and if we really do take what we have and give to those in need (I'm looking at you, Crop Walk), then we start loving our neighbors, too.

I gotta be honest, this is one of the single hardest things Jesus asks us to do. Give up every single thing you have and follow me? That just sounds crazy. I can't see myself or most anyone I know actually doing that. But maybe we ought to give it a look, and in looking begin to see all those things we've missed. Like ourselves, our enemies, our neighbors, or even God.