

## How Do We Make Each Day Count?

People of God – people sourced by immeasurable Love, I invite us to wonder together this morning: How do we make each day count? The love of God has drawn us together on this early autumn morning – via livestream and here in our house of worship – on land which the Wahpekute Dakota people and others have loved for millennia before us.

As we move into this time of wondering, let's pause first to pray. Holy Spirit, we are surrounded by your beauty and goodness found in this space and in the company of these people. As we wonder (with the Psalmist, with Jesus, with that eager man) how to make our days count, guide the meditations of our hearts and minds as we wonder together. Amen.

Friends in faith, in today's reading from the gospel of Mark, a man approaches Jesus in hopeful anticipation: "*Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*" The question seems almost rhetorical – as though the person is confident that Jesus will affirm his current faithful, law-abiding behavior as having already secured for him an inheritance of eternal life.

In my childhood, this behavior was known as "fishing for compliments." With an eye toward nurturing integrity, adults would sometimes call out my peers and me for "fishing for compliments."

Part of what I love about this Scripture passage is the way in which Jesus engages the man with both head and heart. He starts out with a direct intellectual response based in a teaching of their shared Jewish faith. Then, moments later, Jesus reveals heart energy that seems to undergird all of his interactions with people – an energy of compassionate empathy.

We heard: *“As [Jesus] was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’”* One thing we know about Jesus is that he was remembered for meeting people right where they were. Jesus did not waste time with empty flattery or condescension. He engaged directly. *“You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. You shall not defraud. Honor your father and mother.’”*

Can you see the man’s eager facial expression relax into relief? *“Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.”* I wonder if he would have felt further satisfied and comfortable in returning to daily living if Jesus had then replied, *“Well done! You have secured your inheritance of eternal life.”* How would you feel if you were in the man’s shoes? What if you met Jesus face to face out in the community and he affirmed that you are living your life in a way that has secured your inheritance of eternal life? *You shall not murder - check! No adultery or stealing - check, check! No bearing false witness, No defrauding - check, check! Honor your mother and your father - check!*

I imagine that we would each feel some amount of relief in such an interaction. But I hope that fleeting satisfaction would give way to questions, longing and active wonder. Is there anything I am lacking – anything more to pursue during this human journey? How might I have impact in ways that feel like I am making my days count?

There is good news! The conversation between Jesus and the man did not end there. Jesus did what he does best: love the other and offer a challenging invitation.

We heard: *“Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing...”* In another translation, Jesus’ words are, *‘There is one thing more that you must do.’*” I can almost see the pure compassion in Jesus’ eyes as they speak to the man’s eyes: *Let your heart be opened further... you will find courage to go deeper.*

Jesus pushed beyond the Ten Commandments to the heart of God’s law. *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. And love your neighbor as yourself.”* Each of us has likely experienced our heart leaning in ugly and harmful ways toward dishonoring the Ten Commandments. Right? If we haven’t murdered someone, we’ve acted or spoken in a way that diminished someone’s life force in an instant. If we haven’t engaged sexually with someone outside of a mutual relationship, we’ve lusted or fixated unhealthily on someone. We’ve lied. If we haven’t defrauded someone, we’ve skittered through a situation with the upper hand, riding on the gas of privilege without being kept accountable for how our ease caused unease or difficulty for someone else. If we haven’t flat out rejected our parents, we’ve sometimes cast blame unfairly or withheld long overdue grace. But even full obedience to these Ten Commandments (these ten great ways to live) would not equate to ultimate faithfulness.

Everlasting life is a state of being in perfect communion with the heart of God, which is love. Ultimate faithfulness is perfect love toward God, self and other. As long as we live, we will need to keep working toward communion with the way of God – the law of Love. Obedience to the Ten Commandments can manifest an orientation toward the law of God’s love – the law of holding love as central in our lives, informing our behavior toward ourselves and our neighbors.

From time to time, we experience a flicker of the truth - that we already share in eternal life. When we pause long enough to hold that flickering truth in the eye of our hearts and minds and feel awe and gratitude toward a God whose love surpasses our understanding, then we can hope for real transformation and welcome the knowledge that we lack something – that there will always be one thing more that we can do.

Let's return to the gospel narrative and watch how the conversation unfolded. *"Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'"* Jesus met the eager man where he was (successful and rich in material goods). Two kinds of good could have come out of the man accepting Jesus' invitation. First and perhaps most obvious, the man's immense material assets could have been offered up for the greater good of the community. Second, in saying, *"Then come, follow me,"* Jesus called out the man's material wealth as a major distraction that hindered him from being available to follow the way of Jesus. Jesus's invitation to that person in the first century CE and to us today is to step outside our comfort zones and toward transformation.

I spent several summers during my college years and several full-time years after college in the field of outdoor or camp ministry. One of my favorite parts of outdoor ministry was the challenge course (or ropes course). I was trained to facilitate group-building experiences based in problem-solving initiatives - some of which happen on the ground and some of which happen safely fifty feet up in the air. As a challenge course facilitator, I would invite people to step outside their comfort zones and into their challenge zones.

In fact, as part of sharing a brief snapshot of challenge course theory with a group as we got going, I would hold my hands in front of me at shoulder width and invite others to do the same. This is my comfort zone. We each have a comfort zone that includes all that feels relatively familiar, within reach, comfortable. “This [*demonstrate*] is my challenge zone,” I would say. As a challenge course facilitator, I would invite members of a group to intentionally step into their challenge zones throughout their day of group-building activities.

Today, Jesus invites all of us to step into our challenge zones. How did the person respond to Jesus’ invitation? “*When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.*” After they parted ways, Jesus said this to his disciples: “*How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.*”

John Shedd lived in the latter 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century and was the second president and chairman of the board of Marshall Field & Company. Shedd once stated this: “*A ship is safe in harbor, but that’s not what ships are for.*” I enjoy the irony that these words on courageous action come from a master merchant, when our Scripture text often inspires detachment from excessive materialism. Yet Shedd’s words are wise: “*A ship is safe in harbor, but that’s not what ships are for.*” We may feel comfortable and safe in our everyday routines, but God has built us with courage so that we will embody love and justice in the times and places in which we live.

How will you and I respond to Jesus’ invitation: “*There is one thing more that you must do. After that, come and follow me.*” **What is the one thing more that God is calling you to do at this time in your life?**

I invite you to look at the image on the front of our worship bulletin for today – a person facing into early fall colors – life in its fullness, cycling through living and dying, vibrancy and rest. I invite you to close your eyes now if you're comfortable doing so. Let's hold an extended moment of silence as we let rise to our consciousness an area of our lives (either a private relationship or a public pursuit) in which we are lacking in action – an area in which there is on more thing you could do. Let's hold silence for one another. *[pause]* Keeping your eyes closed, imagine Jesus' invitation to courage shedding light that leads you on into the beautifully messy forest of life, helping make your path evident to you. *[pause]* Imagine your actions following your heart's longing toward God's love and justice. *[pause]*

As we open our eyes, I offer you words from the late former first lady Eleanor Roosevelt. She once said this: *"Do one thing every day that scares you."* She also said, *"We gain strength, and courage, and confidence by each experience in which we really stop to look fear in the face... we must do that which we think we cannot."* *"Do one thing every day that scares you... We gain strength, and courage, and confidence by each experience in which we really stop to look fear in the face... we must do that which we think we cannot."* Words of wisdom from Eleanor Roosevelt.

And let's hear as a blessing a few of the words from the Psalmist:

*"You turn us back to dust and say, 'Turn back, you mortals.'  
For a thousand years in your sight  
are like yesterday when it is past or like a watch in the night.  
You sweep them away; they are like a dream,  
like grass that is renewed in the morning;*

*in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;*

*in the evening it fades and withers.*

*So teach us to count our days*

*that we may gain a wise heart.”*

May we sing that tune with our lives – alongside the Psalmist. One great gift and deep privilege of serving alongside you as pastor is each opportunity you offer me to accompany you as you sort through how to have loving impact with your one life. And another great gift and deep privilege of serving alongside you as pastor is each opportunity we harness as a congregation to do that same sorting through of how we will have loving, just impact in the world around us.

May we each and together trust God to grant us the courage to follow the law of love – every day, allowing Love to shine light and grow courage within us.

There is yet more that we can do to have loving impact – to make our days count. That Love is counting on us. Amen!

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Psalm 90:1-6, 12-17, Mark 10:17-27