

“The One Thing You Lack”

The Gratitude Campaign – part #2

Mathew 19:16-22

Good morning, Church. As you can see, I am not Pastor Eric, but I am his wife Katja, for those of you that don't know me yet. Pastor Eric is taking this week to help his parents finish a few things that we weren't able to get to this summer, so I offered to step in and fill the pulpit this morning.

I am so glad that you decided to join us this morning both here in person and online. If you are here for the first time today, I want you to know that we welcome you with open hearts.

I invite you to pray with me this morning before we take a deeper look at our scripture for today:

Almighty Father, we are here to receive your Word. We know that you have something to tell us today, and we are ready to listen. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to You, LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen

I hope you have enjoyed the cooler weather the last few days and for all of our students and parents, I pray that you have had a wonderful start to a new school year.

Every year at this time I am reminded how different my school experience was from most of you and my children. Growing up in Germany, not only did my school day look very different, the focus on what was important was different as well.

While grades mattered in Germany as much as they do here, the way we obtained those grades was unlike most of the tests my children take in school. I never once had a multiple choice quiz or test until I was in driver's ed my junior year of high school. All of our grades required us to be able to explain what we had learned in class.

I feel as though multiple choice exams would have made studying and acing tests a lot easier. As it was, I was always disappointed if I did not receive a perfect score on a test and would immediately pour over the returned paper to find my mistakes.

I distinctly remember receiving a 99.5/100 in an 11th grade German essay. We had had 4 hours to write an essay based on a book we read, answering questions as we went along. I had written over 2,000 words and the essay was graded on grammar, punctuation, and spelling as well as content. It took me a while, but eventually I found that I had missed a comma towards the end of the essay. In the grand scheme of things the missed comma and the resulting reduction of half a point did not change my grade, but I was discontent.

It seems silly now, looking back at 17-year-old me, but how often is life just like that essay I wrote? Now, life is not a test, and neither is faith, but don't we often treat them as though they are? We want a checklist to go through and once we have checked all the correct boxes we will be perfectly content. The problem often presents itself when we look at our lists and all of the sudden new items have appeared. We are confronted with finding a solution to alleviate our anxiety and insecurity when we don't feel like we know the correct answer.

So how do we arrive at a point where we will be happy? In our Bible Study on Tuesday we talked about the constant barrage of advertisements in our lives. If we just buy this new, better appliance, phone, computer, car, house, diet supplement, or self-help book, our lives will be easier, more fulfilled, and ultimately happier.

But do these things really help us in our search for contentment? Some of them might, but most of the time they create more stress and anxiety as they overstretch our budgets and deepen our discontentment.

Yet, we are all looking for that one thing that will finally make us happy. There has to be one thing that will truly satisfy our longing for fulfillment.

This is where we meet the young Jewish man in our scripture reading today. He wants to know what it will take for him to be truly content. He certainly has the right idea: Go find a rabbi and ask him the question that is burning in your chest. And Jesus, of all people, is undoubtedly the best rabbi to approach. The young man does just that. He finds Jesus and asks him what he must do to have eternal life. Of course, Jesus, being a great teacher, asks a question in return. “Why are you asking me? You should know the answer: keep the commandments.”

This troubles the young man, and he asks for clarification. “Which ones?”. He wants the study guide, the cheat sheet neatly organized into multiple choice questions. Now, this might seem like there is an obvious answer, as we all know (or know of) the 10 commandments. However, tradition holds that there are 613 commandments in the Hebrew Bible, known to us as the Old Testament. These commandments are known as the mitzvot of the Torah.

Wow, 613 laws to follow! That is quite the test. Even though the young man sounds as though he is being cheeky with Jesus, he really wants to know what the answer is. He probably does not know all 613 of them by heart, so he is starting to get really nervous.

It always surprises me that Jesus gives him such a short list in reply: “Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness, honor your father and your mother; and love your neighbor as yourself.” We probably all recognize these as part of the 10 Commandments from Exodus 20. Although, the list isn’t even complete. Jesus does not mention to “Love the Lord your God.” or “Worship him only”.

Every commandment Jesus asks the young man, and by extension all of us, to follow, has to do with loving your neighbor. Jesus is really asking the young man, how much do you love your neighbor?

You can almost hear the young man exhale: “I have checked all the correct boxes then. How come I am still missing points?”

He knows that following those commandments is not enough. He is aware that he is still lacking. In fact, he is so aware of his shortcomings, that as Mark 10:17 tells us, he falls to his knees before Jesus. This is even more surprising in light of what Luke tells us in his retelling of this incident. Luke actually identifies the young man as not just rich, but as a ruler. Falling on your knees is an act of submission and humility and for a young ruler to do so in front of a poor traveling rabbi, gives us an idea of his anguish. He is letting Jesus know that he does not feel worthy to stand in his presence.

While we don’t tend to go down on our knees a lot today, I have had times where I was praying and the only posture that felt right, was on my knees, crying out to God.

While Matthew tells us that the young man asks Jesus: “What do I lack?” and Mark and Luke tell us that Jesus was the one to say: “There is one thing you still lack.”, it really does not matter who actually spoke the words. Both Jesus and the young man were thinking it. They were aware that there was more to the test.

The beauty of reading this incident in all three Gospels that mention it is the fact that we get a much broader picture of the situation. Mark tells us something that Matthew and Luke do not mention. Before Jesus actually answered the young ruler, he looked him in the eyes and loved him. I suspect that Jesus already knew what would happen next, but in his compassion he also knew he needed to let the young man know of his unconditional love. The young man had come to Jesus, honored him, and let Jesus see his vulnerability. He sincerely wanted to know the answer to his question. Yet despite this tender moment, Jesus was not going to let the young man off the hook. “There is one thing you lack.”

This young man had followed all of the commandments since his youth, but Jesus knew that his possessions controlled his life. So he challenged him: “Sell all you have, give to the poor, so that you have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me.”

The young man was stunned at this reply and grieved. Jesus had asked too much of him. He had many possessions and could not fathom giving them up. They had more control over him than he knew. In reply, he turned around and went away. I believe that Jesus grieved at this moment just as much as the young rich ruler did. Being confronted with the truth hurts.

This young man stated that he followed the commandments. The Bible tells us over and over that we need to give to the poor. Deuteronomy 15:7-8 reads: “Do not harden your heart or shut your hand from your poor brother, instead...open your hand to him and freely loan him whatever he needs.” Verse 11 says: “For there will never cease to be poor in the land; that is why I am commanding you to open wide your hand to your brother and to the poor and needy in your land.”

I believe that the young man was generous. He was giving to the poor. After all, he obeyed the commandments. But was he giving from his heart or was he doing so reluctantly because it was what he was supposed to do? I believe that it was the latter, and the young man was aware of that struggle. The one thing he lacked was complete and total surrender of his possessions to God, so that they would not hold him back from following Jesus without hesitation.

Here at Grace UMC we want to be a church that follows Jesus with all of who we are and all of what we have. I had a wonderful conversation last Sunday with a person in this church who has chosen to follow Christ and support the ministry of this church. They are grateful for the opportunity to bless others with their time, their presence, and their resources. By doing so they have been richly blessed time and time again.

Pastor Eric and I have seen these rich blessings through our gifts as well. Helping those who are in need touches a spot in our hearts that few other things can.

How do you feel about all that God has given you? Are you grateful? You might not feel like you are rich, but you are. Having food on our table and a roof over our heads are privileges that billions of people around the world do not have access to. One of the reasons we pay something called Ministry Shares, previously known as Apportionments, is to give to the poor. We give to minister in Jesus' name. Together, United Methodists do remarkable ministry around the world. We care for survivors recovering from earthquakes and storms; we invest, long term, in vulnerable communities; we implement the most effective solutions to diseases like malaria; we equip the next generation to lead the church and society. In all of this, we share the good news of Jesus Christ. We give because God first gave to us.

God calls us to be a part of his work and give our possessions away. We can only do that if our hearts are in the right place. We need to be grateful for what we have received and grateful for what we can give away to others who are in need. If we treat our faith like a test, checking the correct boxes to reach 100% or like buying a golden ticket into heaven, we need to check our hearts. The only

way to true happiness and pleasing God is by being obedient. When we are ready to surrender, we will be able to find true contentment.

It can be scary to drop money into the offering plate, no matter the amount, because we are surrendering control of it. However, remember that you are putting it in God’s hands. He will use your gifts as blessings and bless you in return.

All of us lack one thing, and Jesus clearly tells us what it is.

The question for us, then, is, will we listen?

Memory Verse: Luke 6:38, NIV

“Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”

Reflection Questions:

1. Have you ever thought your faith could be summed up as “just trying to pass the test”? What experiences and teaching lead you to your conclusion?
2. What questions do you have that you wish you could ask Jesus? Would he give you a simple answer in return? Why or why not?
3. Why do you think the young man was dissatisfied with life? Do you think Jesus was fair in answering him? Why or why not?
4. Do you use your wealth to store up treasures in heaven? How?
5. What is the one thing that you lack? What is the most difficult sacrifice or control you must give up to follow Jesus? Will you do it?