

**October 7, 2018 (World Communion Sunday)**

**TEXT: Mark 10:17–27**

**TITLE: Arguments & Answers: Being Good**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

Here in the middle of Mark's gospel, as Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem, a series of arguments occurred. In the first, the disciples were arguing about who is the greatest, to which Jesus gave the answer: "Care for the little ones, for whoever wants to be first must be servant of all." Then John, one of the disciples boasted about silencing a man who was casting out demons but wasn't a direct follower of Jesus, to which Jesus corrected him and said: "Don't doubt his worth, for whoever is not against us is for us." In today's passage, a man kneels before Jesus and asks a sincere but misguided question: "What do I have to do to inherit eternal life?" In reply, Jesus talks about goodness, about selling all we own, about camels passing through the eye of a needle, and about a God with whom all things are possible.

Sometimes I think that rich man's question is the motivation for why many of us come to church—"Pastor, cut to the chase. Just tell me what I need to do to get into heaven." It's a sincere question, but it's not quite the right question, as Jesus' answer made clear. So listen as we talk together about four words: goodness, life, heaven, and possibilities. And to help us with this conversation, I'm going to introduce you to a young mother and Presbyterian pastor named Lori Raible.

Lori serves a congregation in Charlotte, North Carolina. Not so long ago she was pumping gas into her SUV at a gas station. Next to Lori was another woman pumping gas wearing blue medical scrubs. Lori said, "Good morning" to which the woman replied, "It's going to be an amazing day." With a degree of doubt, Lori said, "I hope so." "Oh, it is. You wait and see." Lori, appreciating her optimism replied, "You are almost convincing me." Then came the clincher. In a lilting Carolina accent the woman spoke again: "Well honey, you know what they say." Then leaning in low, "she whispered "They say we gotta talk it into existence."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus was stopped on the road by a man with a sincere question. He wanted to know how to inherit eternal life. He knew the commandments; he understood what was required of him. But he wanted to hear the answer come out of Jesus' mouth. He wanted Jesus to verify he was on the right path—to talk it into existence. But Jesus knew that before he could talk about eternal life, he had to talk first about this life. So before he answered the man's question, he asked a question of his own. He asked if the man understood goodness.

The word "good" is mostly used as an adjective. Football teams play a "good game," especially when they win. Your pet is a "good dog" when she listens to your commands. It's been a "good day," even an "amazing day," when things go your way. But goodness is not just a quality of things; it is a thing in and of itself.

Good is not evil. Good is something desirable, something foundational, something life-affirming. Remember back in the book of Genesis when the ancient poets described

creation as a time when God literally talked into existence sun, moon and stars, plant life, animal life; and at the end of each day, God whispering contentedly “It is good.” To call creation good isn’t to say that it is perfect, because creation is ever changing, adapting, messing up and trying new things. To call creation good isn’t to say that it is peaceful, because this world, this universe is powerful, violent, spinning off planets and moons and black holes in distant galaxies, and earthquakes and tsunamis here on earth. To call creation good is to affirm one thing: that it is capable of sustaining life, of adapting, nurturing and doing whatever is necessary to move from today’s challenges to tomorrow’s possibilities. This may sound a bit clunky, but goodness is that which “forwards” life, that which moves all living things forward toward the horizon of God’s ultimate goodness. Goodness forwards life.

The man who stopped Jesus on the road knew about “goods”—the commodities and possessions of life. And he knew about things that were called “good” like the Ten Commandments. He had come to believe that by being good and by earning lots of goods, he was automatically on the path to heaven—a place guaranteed for good people. Now, since I spoke briefly last week about hell, it seems only fair that I pause for a moment here and speak briefly about heaven. Again, much of what we believe about heaven and hell comes more from secular sources than sacred scripture. Hell is less about fire and devils and more about rejecting relationships—about truly, selfishly isolating yourself from God and others. Heaven is less about clouds and cherubs and more about choosing relationships—about serving the least, seeing those on the margin, knowing that our lives are intertwined with others in ways we only dimly perceive now, but in time we will see with perfect clarity—in fact, in time we’ll see as God sees and love as God loves. How grandma and pets and wings and harps fit into this heavenly equation is a conversation for another day, and likely beyond what I or most theologians can confidently answer. But if goodness is of God, and goodness is what “forwards” life, then heaven is our name for the finish line, the culmination of where forwarded life is headed.

Let’s return to Pastor Lori for a moment. Lori likes to run. It’s a discipline she learned jogging beside her father. A few years ago Lori had the chance to join a Habitat for Humanity work trip to Malawi. While she was there, she would regularly get up at 5, smell the smoky fires, see the first hints of an African sunrise, and go for a run. In a nation of extreme poverty, of days spent in labor that is hard and physically exhausting, the idea of running for fun seems strange. Lori would attract both laughing children and furrowed brows of adult incomprehension on her morning runs. One day she got lost and passed through a village where her skinny legs and immodest running clothes drew a growing chorus of mockery, jeers and laughter from the people. Lori became self-conscious and started to cry even as she knew she should just keep running. Then a young girl came out of the crowd, took her hand and ran beside her. Her tattered dress bounced as they ran; her bare feet lifted small clouds of dust from the road. But she ran beside Lori, guiding her for just over a mile until she was safely back at her campsite. Lori stopped. Unable to communicate in Chichewa and possessing nothing at all in that moment, she smiled at the girl and unwound a blue scarf she’d been using to

hold back her hair—pressed it into the young girl’s hand and watched as she turned to run back to her village.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus looked at the young man and loved him—loved his sincerity, his intensity, his desire to do, to earn, to inherit eternal life. But all his goods kept him from what was truly good. So Jesus said “Go, sell what you own, give it away, and come follow me.” That sounds so hard. We have so much and we depend on it so deeply. To give it all up feels impossible—“fat camel through a skinny needle” kind of impossible. Who can do it? Really, can anyone do it?

Sometimes we get close. Sometimes we place a blue scarf in a young girl’s hand because it’s all we have and yet out of all the world’s stuff it is one small thing we’ll never forget. Sometimes we get close when we help build a house for a family we don’t know; when we say a prayer for a friend of a friend in a distant hospital; when we try to do our best by making donations, by writing letters, by sitting at dinner tables with kids and talking through how sad it is that schools need to do active shooter drills—teachers banging on doors, students taught to pile up tables in front of doors; when we talk through how sad it is to hear how women who share stories of being abused are treated with mockery and skepticism, of unjust shootings of African Americans, of murdered transgender people, of addictions and under-employment and political posturing before yet another divisive election cycle. The camel seems so big and the eye of the needle so small. Yet we take a deep breath and remember that some things have to be talked into existence—and that real goodness forwards life no matter the cost.

In that moment we look to Jesus and, like the disciples of old, we ask: Can this really work? Are we running in the right direction? Can the promises of eternal life be glimpsed now and one day actually gifted to us, imperfect disciples that we are? Jesus answered the young man’s question even as he answers our own: “The things you seek and want and hope for, by yourself, are impossible to attain. But not so for God. With God all things are possible.”

Soon we will share a communion meal, hosted by the one whose lessons of love were drowned out by a chorus calling for crucifixion; the light of the world who was enclosed in a tomb of darkness for three days. Yet this Savior offers us bread and wine—and calls us all to gather around the table: American, Malawian, red state, blue state, possessing much, possessing nothing except some running shoes and a small blue scarf. God whispered after each day of creation, “It is good.” Christ lovingly offers himself to us at the communion table, saying “Be not afraid. It is still good.” The Holy Spirit stirs us to take one another’s hands and do all we can to forward life, remembering “It will be good.” For with God, all things are possible.

AMEN.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Chase” by Lori Archer Raible, *Presbyterian Outlook*, October 8, 2018, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.