

SERMON: What Do I Still Lack?

TEXT: Matthew 19:16-30

What a week! What a world! What a nightmare! The sermon I'm sharing with you today is not the same sermon that I began writing on Thursday. And yet, I'm finding that the title I gave it still applies. WHAT DO I STILL LACK?

The crowded stores and the empty shelves are evidence of what we think we lack: toilet paper, hand sanitizer, cleaning supplies. But what we're really lacking in these tumultuous times is a sense of security. A feeling of control. When the world around us seems to be spinning out of control, our natural, human tendency is to find something that we *can* control. Apparently, we've decided it's toilet paper.

Let's face it. We are the rich young man in the reading from the Gospel of Matthew. We're good people. And when Jesus says that you have to keep the commandments in order to obtain eternal life, we don't worry too much. "You shall not murder." Check. "You shall not steal." Check. You shall honor your father and mother." Check. "You shall not commit adultery." Well, it's

complicated. “You shall not bear false witness.” Umm, pass. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Listen, let me tell you what my neighbor did to me.

But, you know, for the most part - especially compared to everybody else - yeah, Jesus, I’ve kept all these commandments. WHAT DO I STILL LACK?

The truth is, we don’t lack very much. But I’m not talking right now about what it takes to get into heaven. I’m talking about what stands in the way of getting to heaven - or, let’s say, getting to God.

You see, the rich young man was a victim of a consumerist society. He had loads of money and all kinds of stuff. He felt secure. He felt in control. He was a good person. He believed in God. He followed the commandments. He wanted to go to heaven. But, when Jesus told him, “sell all your possessions, and give the money to the poor... then come follow me,” it was like he’d been punched in the gut. Without his riches, he’d feel insecure and out of control. Without his money and his stuff, he might not even know who he was anymore.

Kathryn is a young woman I know who grew up - and still attends - my home church in North St. Paul, Minnesota. She represents the third generation of a family who have been faithful and devoted to God and to the church. She is forty years old, married, with four beautiful children. And she has been battling a rare form of lung cancer for about five years. She has been hospitalized dozens of times, has even been close to death on a few occasions. Now the cancer is in her spine and she's paralyzed from the waist down. At least one of her children has been diagnosed with OTSD, "ongoing traumatic stress disorder" as a result. Kathryn has never smoked, nor had to live with second-hand smoke. She and her husband have always been conscientious about eating healthy and getting plenty of exercise. You might say they've done everything right. So, it's tempting to ask God why such terrible things are happening to such good people. They don't deserve it!

Back to our gospel lesson, when the rich man has gone away, Jesus turns his teaching to the disciples, discussing how difficult it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Peter's response is similar to that of the rich young man; he argues that faithfulness ought to be rewarded. "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"

I confess, I've had the same feelings myself in times of struggle. "What more do you want from me, God? I'm trying to do your work down here; how about sending a little goodness my way?"

Maybe you've had similar thoughts. WHAT DO I STILL LACK?

I think the first mistake made by the rich young man - and maybe us, too - is to treat the commandments like a checklist or a scorecard. Something we can bring to God in prayer, hoping to cash it in for special favors and stuff we want. Like a child collecting her allowance for the chores she's completed. "Cleaned my room, swept the floor, loaded the dishwasher. Allowance, please."

Isn't that how it's supposed to work? Our part of the covenant with God is to be faithful to God. God's part of the covenant is to reward us with eternal life in heaven. WHAT DO I STILL LACK?

The key word in this question is "I". The rich young man is thinking only about himself. He's not thinking about the poor. He has more than he needs while

the poor continue to be hungry and cold. He's breaking the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. What he lacks, what you lack, what I lack is a sense of community and a responsibility to those who are less fortunate.

I was talking to my sister on the phone yesterday about our experiences of going to the store and fighting the crowds and realizing that all the toilet paper is gone. I heard my brother-in-law in the background make a sarcastic comment. It wouldn't be polite to quote him word-for-word, but let me paraphrase. "We all gotta cover our own *self* before we help anybody else."

**That** is the problem. Our "me first" attitude. Our blindness to the struggles of those less fortunate - *the least of these*. Our apathy for how the poor are kept poor by systems that favor the rich and powerful. Our tendency to blame the poor for not pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. Our unwillingness to be educated about systemic poverty and to fight for liberty and justice for **all**. **THAT** is what we still lack.

Am I saying that we should do as Jesus told the rich young man, “Go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven.” No. I’m not saying that.

But I am saying that we need to redefine our understanding of the word *treasure*.

Jesus calls us to *treasure* our neighbor as ourselves. To *treasure* our community and every person in it. Jesus calls us to *treasure* our relationship with God. To love the Lord our God above all else. Jesus calls us to *treasure* our fellow human beings more than dollar bills and bank balances. Jesus calls us to put others first and ourselves last.

Someone once told me in no uncertain terms, “This is not about you.” Despite the negative context of that encounter, the statement is true nonetheless. It’s not about me. It’s not about you. It’s about us.

This life of faith is about us. This building of God’s kingdom is about us. This struggle to be loved, to be free, to be healthy, to be saved is about us.

If my staying home keeps you healthy, then that's what I need to do. If I am fortunate enough to have a stockpile of toilet paper, then I ought to be sharing it with those who have none.

Ubuntu. Unbuntu is a Zulu word from South Africa. Roughly translated, it is often translated as "humanity towards others." In a broader, more philosophical sense, it means, "the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity". I have seen it defined with these words: *I am because we are*. Ubuntu.

For God so loved *the world*. We need each other. We belong to each other. Let us treasure each other... to the glory of God.

AMEN.