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Mark 10

The One Thing You Lack

By the Rev. Salying Wong

When my parents became acquainted with sirens, they immediately added them to their parenting repertoire. We didn't grow up with sirens, much less electricity or motorized vehicles, in 1970's China. So when we arrived in the US and my parents learned that the sirens meant the police were in pursuit of "bad" people, they told me and my siblings this: "You hear that. That the police. If you not good, we call police and he take you to jail." Of course none of us swallowed it, and it became a tongue-in-cheek joke in the house. On occasion, I retorted, "Hey mom, that's not the police, it's the ambulance coming to rescue me from your parenting." My parents would shake their heads saying, "Ai ya, bad girl. You bad girl." And we would giggle. There was a lot of laughter in our home.

Even with this lightness in the home, it was also ruled by a narrow and simplistic moral system. I was either a "good girl" or a "bad girl" based on the whimsy of my parents' desires. Even today, when I fix my dad's tech problems on his TV, problems which result from his inexplicable desire to click random buttons, he'll exclaim, "Good girl!" But, when I try to explain to him that the bot on WeChat is not actually his friend, he would take offense and say, "You bad girl."

Today, I want to consider with you the topic of "being good". What is your relationship to being good? Do you think you ought to be good? What does this look like to you? Or, do you think being good is boring and you'd rather be bad, or at least apathetic or skeptical? Even though I could be mouthy with the authorities in my life, in the end, all I ever wanted to be was good. When I peer into the heart of that young immigrant girl of eight years, who was so scared in her displacement that her legs rattled her classroom desk—I see that for her being good was a

survival strategy. Even today, I operate on a logic that if I do what I am supposed to, then I would please the people around me, they would keep me safe, and I wouldn't feel so disoriented.

We learned from my sermon series on the teachings of Thomas Keating that people have three core energy centers: a desire for safety and security, power and control, and esteem and affection. We also learned that early on, we acquired programs for happiness, programs aimed at fulfilling these core needs. Inevitably, the programs fail us because they depend on everyone playing their part in our programs. They fail because the world has not signed up for our programs.

The programs get even more complicated if we believe our programs are God-given. Like, "God told me to be good." And, "The church told me to follow these rules." When our programs are unmasked to their core energy center, the revelation can leave us disoriented, afraid, angry. And yet, this is also the place where we begin to perceive the invitation to be loved, not for what we perform, but only for who we are. This is what happens for the rich man who comes to Jesus.

The rich man rushes up to Jesus, with a heart desiring to follow him. This man has been practicing his whole life what he'd been told would make him a good person. I imagine he did it with much sincerity, but with little awareness of the energy center driving his devotion. Something very significant happens when he addresses Jesus as, "Good rabbi." Jesus undresses his program for happiness and challenges him to examine what his motivations actually are.

The exchange goes quickly. The rich man says, "Good Rabbi." And Jesus replies, "Good? Why do you call me good? Only God is good." When the rich man addresses Jesus as, "Good Rabbi," he assumes that Jesus and he are in the same game—the game that all the other religious leaders are in—striving for a superlative holiness through the practice of Torah and holiness codes. Isn't that what all spiritual people should do? Isn't it basic? But Jesus isn't playing that game. He's actually not interested in his goodness, most especially people's good opinion of

him. Amazingly, he doesn't care. Instead, he points to God's goodness as the only thing that really matters. It is the only thing that gives life.

Yet, our rich man persists in playing the game he knows how to play and asks Jesus next, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" In other words, "How do I earn eternal life? How do I beat my fellow pilgrims on the spiritual path?" Interestingly, Jesus sticks with tradition and tells him to obey the Torah's commandments. They are given to everyone by God for life. There's no contest, only God's generosity.

But the rich man believes there is a superlative way, a way that places him ahead of the average person in goodness and holiness. He has to know! What is it Jesus?!

Jesus looks at him and loves him. The loving gaze of Jesus is the moment of invitation. Jesus sees to the heart of the rich man's need and the desperation of his programs for happiness. He sees how this man has been held captive by their falsehoods. For the truth is that one cannot earn eternal life. The Torah was given for life, not as a means to put our goodness on display, not to use goodness as a means for self-aggrandizement. Here, love means being told the one thing we cannot do. For this man, Jesus tells him to sell everything he possesses and give it to the poor. He says this because he knows the rich man cannot do this. The rich man is unmasked of his own self-deception and shown to be what he is—just a regular human being. This restores the rich man to a posture of need, to his need for the grace and love of God. This need is the one thing he lacked that would free him from his ego.

When the rich man leaves the scene sad because he couldn't sell everything for the poor, and thus had to remain a mere human rather than the superlative one of his fantasies, we do not need to worry about him. He has the one thing he lacks, the unmasking and the invitation to let love alone win his life. It takes time to be dispossessed of our programs. He might still find his way.

Meanwhile, Peter pipes up and competes with the rich man who just left, saying, "Well, we left everything to follow you." And Jesus tells him the one thing he lacks. It's not about the possessions. He will get that all back. But, with persecutions. Because for Peter, it won't be about stuff, it will be about being persecution. He will shrivel as soon as the heat turns up. He will deny Jesus three times before the cock crows. He will need to be dispossessed of what he puts between him and God.

We all lack one thing, but that thing has a different name for each of us. It is not about being better so as not to lack one thing. It is about surrendering to the reality that we are human, that without God's goodness, we are nothing. We are in need of God's kind of grace. And when we do that, the camel is threaded through the needle.