

“Jesus, looking at the man, loved him and said, ‘One thing you lack.’” \*\*\*  
Amen.

Halloween is coming up soon – I can tell that some by the changing of the leaves and by the way the air gets cold at night these days. I would say that I can tell the approach of Halloween by the popping-up of storefront costume outlets, but that started happening practically back in July, so that sign is no longer reliable. My favorite sign of Halloween, though, is the appearance of various haunted houses. I love a good ghost story, will watch almost any cheesy horror movie, and I will gladly fork over \$10 to go through a good haunted house. I love the feeling of being temporarily frightened, and of laughing in the face of that which is supposed to scare me.

The haunted house I went to in tenth grade, however, with my friend Rachel, is an exception to my love of Halloween. Rachel was a born-again evangelical, and ever since she found out my religious background on the first day of high school, she was determined to save my Catholic soul. And so it was that I found myself being pulled through the rooms of a ‘Hell House’ one cold October night. In each room, we were greeted by the aftermath of some supposedly grievous sin, the sort which we were warned against daily in our health classes: in one room, we watched as actors played out a scene in which a young man died of a drug overdose; another scene in the parking lot had a car twisted around a tree, screams coming from inside the tangled wreck resulting from drunk driving. A third room showed a pale young woman,

suffering from the results of a dangerous abortion.

This was frightening stuff, indeed, but not what I had expected.

Finally, we made our way along a catwalk suspended over fiery pits in which actors writhed and screamed – I guess these were the people who were supposedly damned by the previous sins we had been shown. At the end of the catwalk, a muscled, bloody Jesus hung from a cross, telling us that the only way to avoid what we had just witnessed was to accept him as our savior.

As I stumbled out of the hell house, church ladies came at me on all sides with pamphlets telling me the three steps of exactly how to go about accepting Jesus; asking me if I were saved; and telling me that they would be praying for me.

I was so angry that I had spent \$7 and an hour of my life walking through that spectacle; and yet, a small part of me wondered, ‘What if they’re right? What if I haven’t said the magic words? What if hell really exists like that? And, if so, am I going there?’

More frightening than any ghost story is the possibility of damnation.

Not a word that you hear from an Episcopal pulpit very often, do you?

But I think it’s something most of us wonder about, especially when

faced with a reading like today's from Mark. "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Kneeling before Jesus, Mark tells us, this man asks the question that many of us might ask if we encountered Jesus: "What do I have to do to get into heaven? Just tell me and I'll do it."

Jesus immediately responds, in a way that seems very formulaic, almost casual: "You know the commandments – you shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; don't steal; don't lie – yada yada yada, right?" It's almost as if the man has asked Jesus, "How do I bake a cake?" And Jesus has launched into a shopping list: "Buy some flour, get some sugar, don't forget the eggs, yada yada yada."

This part – this checklist – is the part that the man already knows. "Teacher," he says, "I have kept these all since my youth."

Up until this point, the story seems somehow hurried, almost as if Jesus is dismissing the man. We are told that Jesus is setting out on a journey, and that he's interrupted in that process by this man's request. Perhaps Jesus is packing a bag, or walking out of town – distracted by whatever is on his mind. But when this man reveals his faithfulness and devotion to the rules, it is then that we are told:

"Jesus, looking at the man, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing.'"

Can you imagine the feeling inside the man's heart at this point? He has

kept the commandments, he's done everything Jesus has asked. I can imagine elation rising in his heart as he mentally checked off each of the commandments, crossing each hurdle, coming near to the goal of eternal life. Only to be confronted by the phrase: 'One thing you lack.'

"Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

"When the man heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions."

Which one of us, in hearing this story, does not imagine ourselves in the place of the unnamed man? Which one of us does not hear Jesus' words as directed at us? I am the man who has possessions, no matter how few; I am the one who will walk away grieving, confronted by the impossibility of meeting Jesus' challenge, for I know that no matter how much I give, no matter how much good I do, I will never be able to sell all of my possessions to follow Jesus. I could imagine having them taken away from me by force, or by tragedy, much like Job; but to give them all up for a life of voluntary poverty seems impossible for most of us.

What, then? Are we damned? Are we the camels that will not fit through the eye of the needle?

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Jesus sees this man's need, and it is not a need for a guaranteed entrance to heaven. It is not a need for the sure knowledge that he's not going to hell, though I think we all might like to have that assurance. Jesus knows that this man's deepest need is for relationship with God. He sees this man, kneeling in front of him, holding tightly to his to-do list – well, in this case, more of a not-to-do list. Don't steal, don't lie, don't cheat. "Teacher, I have done these things," says the man. His eyes are on eternal life, he can see his goal in sight. But he has lost sight of the God who is in front of him. He has lost sight of Jesus who is to be found not only standing in front of him, but also who is to be found in his neighbors – in those who are needy in his own community.

In response to the righteousness produced by this man's checklist, Jesus in essence says, 'Eyes off the prize!' Eyes off a distant, glorious relationship with God; and eyes on to the God all around you. Give what you have to those around you, and come, follow me.

One thing you lack, says Jesus, looking at us, seeing us. Seeing our need for relationship with him and with others. What is it we lack? Though Jesus calls us all to give to the poor, he does not call us all to miserable poverty. Rather, Jesus calls us into vulnerable and transforming relationship with God and with neighbor. Our salvation must be worked out not via checklist, but rather through personal and loving relationship down here on earth.

Jesus does not deny the reality of heaven, or eternal life. Instead, he

suggests that we ask a different question when we encounter him. Out of our fear of damnation, and our desire for the security of salvation, we ask, “Teacher, what must we do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus, looking at us, loves us, and invites us into relationship. “Come, follow me, and be transformed.”

Amen.