

Faith Mennonite Church
October 14, 2012
Joetta Schlabach

Eternity begins now!
Amos 5:6-7, 10-15; Mark 10:17-31

A week ago Friday night at our church retreat out at Camp St. Croix, the children were having a grand time playing with a beach ball in the foyer area of the dining hall where we had gathered for treats, games, and conversation. As adults were beginning to disperse to their sleeping quarters, preschool energy continued to pulse. All of a sudden we heard a shrill cry and found that Luke Zabriskie had fallen face first onto the smooth concrete floor. The impact removed one of his front teeth. Fortunately we had an emergency room physician in the house who could provide assurance and comfort to the parents. Luke, however, remained inconsolable and as his mother carried him to the lodge where they were staying he wailed over and over: "I want my tooth...I want my tooth...I want my tooth."

Next morning he seemed reticent as he came to breakfast but soon his energy returned. But alas, he bumped his mouth again--this time on one of the seating benches. More blood and tears flowed, but Doctor David assured that no additional damage was done. By evening, Luke was in good form, dancing with multiple partners during the entire hour-plus of folk dancing!

On Sunday morning when Luke entered our worship space, he looked up with his bright eyes and smile, and proudly proclaimed, "I'm missing a tooth!" In just 36 hours he had found the joy of letting something go!

In the verses that immediately precede our gospel story this morning, Jesus told his disciples: "...whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." This is an important frame for understanding the story of the man with many possessions.

Unlike the many people who posed questions to Jesus as a way to trap or trip him up, the man in today's story comes in a genuine spirit. He is already religious, devout, and yet a seeker, desiring more. He recognizes and respects Jesus as a teacher, and so he asks: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus reviews the commandments, including the concern echoed in our reading from Amos, the call for justice, for not defrauding others. And the man responds that he has indeed kept all these. Mark describes Jesus' response as one of tenderness and love: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him" (v. 21). "There's only one more thing you lack," says Jesus, "Go sell what you own, give it to the poor, and you'll have treasure in heaven, then come follow me."

Obviously this wasn't the answer the man expected. The text describes his reaction as "shock" and "grief, for he many possessions." Jesus' answer to this man was sort of like the jolt that Luke experienced that yanked out a tooth. Luke was playing so gleefully. We had been listening to the squeals of laughter as he and the other children bounced the ball. None of us expected the evening to come to such a crashing halt. The halt for the man was a reversal of all he had been taught. In Jewish thought, and this is especially prominent when we read the book of Proverbs, there was a sense that if one lived a righteous life, one would be blessed with prosperity, with material goods. The text gives us no indication of how the man acquired his possessions—perhaps through hard work, perhaps through inheritance. I think we can be sure it wasn't through fraud or unjust business practices. Whatever the case, we can be sure he believed they were a sign of blessing. The only thing he thought he lacked was eternal security.

But this is where his world view of eternity collided with Jesus' view of the kingdom. For Jesus, eternity and the kingdom were interchangeable; eternity begins now. Eternity is the kingdom of God present among us, here and now, not fully complete but already begun. And this kingdom is something that God does, something that God brings about. Like an inheritance, it is pure gift. It isn't something we work for or earn. It is something we accept, we enter, we become part of, and by which we are shaped.

I believe Jesus sincerely wanted this man to follow him. Jesus didn't make a lot of individual invitations for people to follow and be part of his intimate community. More often he sent people back home to share the good news of what had happened in their lives, or, in the Gospel of Mark, he often told them *not* to tell anyone, probably because of the opposition to his ministry. But it seems he desired this man, and not for reasons we might find him desirous. We might be inclined to think, "Man, Jesus, you sure blew this one! This guy could have bank rolled your community for a whole year or more!"

But Jesus was thinking kingdom. Jesus was thinking about how this man could enter, as a child, placing his full trust in God, not for the blessing he would receive, not for eternal life in some future time, but for the blessing he would become for others now. We don't know what happened to this man. We're left with the image of his leaving in grief. One commentator suggests that the grief could either be a despondency, of not getting the answer he wanted, or it could be the grief of the beginning conversion, of beginning to count the cost of what it would mean to follow Jesus, to enter eternity in the now of the kingdom.¹ Perhaps he did sell and give away his possessions. Perhaps he returned to the one who looked at him with love.

Because the story doesn't end here. The story continues with an extended dialogue between Jesus and his disciples. Although the disciples had left their possessions behind when they joined the itinerant life following Jesus, they evidently also held on to the conventional wisdom that wealth was a sign of godliness and blessing. Like the man of many possessions, they of few possessions were perplexed when Jesus said that it's hard for persons with wealth to enter the kingdom. And when Jesus shifted into hyperbolic drive and said, "Harder, in fact, than for a camel to get through the eye of a needle!" they were downright astounded. "But, Jesus added, "it's not impossible, because for God all things are possible."

And, what's more, says Jesus, when God does the miracle of drawing us into the kingdom on God's terms—not ours—another miracle occurs. As we loosen our grip on the things that the surrounding culture tells us are necessary for security or are signs of status (and this isn't only possessions and wealth, it can also be activities, busyness), we gain a community of kingdom citizens...a community of hope...a community of freedom, of gratitude, and hospitality. We move from the grief of wanting our tooth, to the joy of celebrating the freedom from that which is missing!

There is a tendency for Christians like ourselves, living in North America where even the poorest among us is rich in the global economy, to either grieve like the man in this story and feel guilty, or to somehow spiritualize the story or leave it as an historical relic. But I hope we will hear the loving invitation of Jesus to allow the kingdom to break ever more fully into our lives, to draw us toward community rather than the accumulation of things and experiences, to find blessing in offering and sharing blessing, both in spiritual and material ways.

Our annual gifts discernment process that is happening this month is one opportunity for one small step. What are the spiritual gifts and talents God is inviting each of us to share with this community in the year ahead? Might I have to give something up and reorder another part of my life to do so? Might I have to trust in a new way that God will empower me to test a gift that isn't yet fully developed? Or perhaps God is calling some of us to simply rest, to pull back from our many commitments and listen for where God would draw us next. The food drive we are beginning today is another small way that we share with the poor in our larger community. Neither of these are "giving all that we have," but God does miracles. Jesus invites us to take small steps of trust today. Because eternity, in the kingdom, begins now.

¹ David B. Howell, "Pastoral Perspective on Mark 10:17-31" in *Feasting on the Word Year B, Volume 4*, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, 166).