

THE CHURCH WE NEED TO BE

The Place of Possessions

Acts 4:32-35, Mark 10:17-31

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McKay Coppins is a man of deep faith and a staff writer at *The Atlantic*. He has four kids, a mortgage, a minivan, and an unassuming demeanor. Last year, his editors staked him ten thousand dollars to bet on football games. They called it a “journalistic exercise.” Coppins got permission from his bishop, and then he set out on this experiment. He studied the lines. He researched all the betting sites. A few months later, he had lost it all.

He describes the experience in a piece titled “Sucker: My Year as a Degenerate Gambler.” But if you read the piece, you learn the money isn’t the point. The point is what he found out about himself on the way down. The way the apps colonized his attention. The way his ten-year-old son found him huddled in the kitchen pantry, making prop bets on his phone, and announced to the whole family, “Dad is hiding again.” The time his wife glanced down the pew one Sunday morning just as he was sneaking a quick peek at DraftKings and stage-whispered, “You are addicted.” The time he sat in the church parking lot watching a Kansas City Chiefs game on his phone during his daughter’s Christmas choir concert.

Coppins’ conclusion is striking. He writes, “I always told people that I didn’t have an addictive personality. Now I had to consider a different possibility: maybe I had simply constructed a life with strong enough guardrails that I’d never had to test the premise.” The essay left me with an unsettling question. What is left when the scaffolding comes crashing down and there’s nowhere left to hide?

That’s where Mark takes us this morning. He was a good man, a faithful man—Mark insists on this. A man who had grown up in the faith, who had kept all of the commandments of his tradition since his childhood. What’s more, he comes running to Jesus. In all the gospels, he is the only person who does that. He runs

to meet Jesus on the road. You don’t run like that unless you’re looking for something you know is missing.

And so, he asks, “What must I do to have life? To have life that is really life? Life that is more than this. I’ve done everything that has been asked of me. What must I do to have life?”

And Mark reports that Jesus looked at him and loved him. He’s the only person who receives that look from Jesus. It is the love that sees the faithful heart and the hidden wound at the same time. Looking at him, he loved him and speaks a truth that leaves the young man nowhere to hide: *Sell everything. Give it to them—not give it away, not give it to a vague charity—but give it to the poor, to the ones who have nothing. And then you can come and follow me.*

And the man’s face fell to the ground. He walked away not in anger, but in sorrow. He could not do it. He was possessed by his possessions. Without them, who would he be? He could not imagine a life apart from his wealth. The question this encounter asks each of us is not how much do you have, but *what has you?*

The man who sprinted to meet Jesus now staggers away. Jesus, who welcomed him with love, watches him go. He turns to his disciples. “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”

The disciples are astounded. They are astonished. They ask, “Then who can be saved?” I find that question fascinating. The assumption behind it is that if not the wealthy, if not the ones who can buy comfort and power and the best of everything else, then who can achieve God’s kingdom? Who can afford the admission ticket?

The disciples’ question reveals their assumption. If this man cannot be saved, who can? I think Jesus loved

that question because he can turn it on its head. You don't earn God's love. You receive it as a gift. God's kingdom is not for sale. You don't achieve entry. You can't buy a ticket to the kingdom of God. But you must be transformed if you are to enter it. You must open your hands.

This week and next we're peering into the life of the earliest Christians. We sometimes mistake them for ancient saints living always in the glow of resurrection light. But the truth is, they were like us. They were flawed. They were frightened. They were ordinary people. They had rent to pay and children to raise and neighbors around them who had less than they had, some who had nothing.

The resurrection did not raise these ordinary, flawed people out of reality. It sent them straight back into it. Jesus' final words before he leaves them are to send them back into the city, where they will encounter the real world of need and opportunity. The resurrection does not raise them out of this reality. But it had shattered the logic they had lived by. The resurrection transformed them. They simply stopped believing in a society built on scarcity.

So, what did they do? They sold their land—actual land with deeds and titles and inheritance and the status that comes with ownership—and they brought the money and laid it down at the apostles' feet. It was distributed not as any had earned or deserved or contributed, but as any had need. This was not charity. Charity by itself leaves the system intact and lets us feel generous within it. But what Acts describes is something far wilder. They used their money to tear down what money often builds: distance and comfort and walls between our lives and their lives.

Why did they do it? Are you ready? Easter. Because death had been defeated, they could stop building their lives on fear. If the tomb was really empty, then nothing about them could be the same. The way of Jesus really was the way to life that is life. And so, they opened their hands.

My professor Stanley Hauerwas has spent his entire teaching career saying this one thing: the church exists to show the world another way—to bear witness to the

kingdom of God rather than the kingdoms of this age. The temptation is always to settle for less. To become useful on empire's terms. To become chaplains to the comfortable who already have enough. But Stanley insists that the world is watching, desperate for a witness to a deeper truth. The world is dying for a people who don't simply reflect the ethos of the era. The world is watching and waiting for those who refuse to bow to idols of market or nation or political tribe or prevailing trend.

I find it much easier to admire the early church than I do to follow them. I envy their faith, and often I resist it. Their life together makes my life look calculated and careful and controlled by comparison. Our family tries to give generously as a practice of our faith. We want our two sons to learn the value of giving and the importance of the spiritual practice of giving away what you have. And then there are these moments when I walk through our neighborhood and see a new patio going in, or hear about a trip someone is taking, and I catch myself running the numbers in my head.

If we Okept more of what we earned, what's ours, what we deserve, we could do that. And suddenly, our patio starts to look small. Our giving starts to look optional. You've worked so hard. You deserve this. You've earned this. And because those voices always sound so reasonable, you almost never notice that it has you.

Friends, the man who meets Jesus on the road is no villain. Jesus saw his faithful heart, his earnest desire to follow. But when his moment of transformation came, he missed it. Why? *For he had many possessions.*

I was on a plane Friday afternoon coming back from Atlanta. It was a small jet. Tight quarters. The man next to me opened his laptop, which also took up part of my lap. The man spent the entire flight refreshing the Dow Jones average. I'm not kidding. For over an hour, he watched that number. Checking. Refreshing. Running his hands through his hair. I looked at the man, and I could see why Jesus would love him. He was not a villain, but he was possessed by the need to know just how much he had.

I thought of the many faithful souls I've had the privilege of being with in hospice care, in those tender days when

everything unnecessary falls away and all that remains is only what was always true. Not once—not a single time—have I heard a dying person wish they had held on tighter. Not once in all my years have I heard anyone mention the patio or the bank balance or the business they built. They always talk about the people they love. They always talk about the moments they were present for. They always talk about the faith that gives them hope. And so, I must conclude that the things that endure are not the things we earn but the ones we never could.

I know many people, good people, people Jesus would just love, who are tethered to a life that no longer fits them. Perhaps it's a profession that pays the bills but has slowly hollowed them out from the inside. Or maybe it's a role constructed over so many years that stepping out of the role feels like disappearing altogether. Or a political allegiance that has started to feel less like conviction and more like a cage. They hear something calling them toward a life that would feed their soul and serve God's world. They hear someone calling them to a life of beauty, a life of meaning, a life of genuine use, a life that is really life—and they cannot move. Their feet are nailed to the floor, their shoulders weighed down by all they carry, the quiet desperation of the self-sufficient and soul-starved.

Maybe you know such a person. A good person, a faithful person. Maybe you are one. Consider that Jesus is looking at you right now, his eyes filled with love for the good in your soul. You lack one thing. Just open your hands. Just take the first step in faith.

The man on the road walked away carrying his wealth and his fear and his sorrow. His journey with Jesus was over before it even began. The earliest Christians walked out to meet the needs of neighbors, to welcome strangers, to live unafraid. The journey they began continues to this day.

And the gap—between the one who walked away and the church that moved in—is where freedom lives. So open *your* hands. Run to meet him. Come and follow him. Amen.