

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁸ Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” ²⁰ He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” ²¹ Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money^[a] to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” ²² When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³ Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” ²⁴ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is^[b] to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” ²⁶ They were greatly astounded and said to one another,^[c] “Then who can be saved?” ²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

²⁸ Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” ²⁹ Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news,^[d] ³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. ³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

The passage from Mark that we use for our gospel today offers us a piece of our Christian faith that often feels far away from the lives that we must pursue here in our communities. As Peter approaches Jesus with the anxiety of how he can continue “being good” and “doing good” before God, as the commandments encourage, Jesus asks Peter to go even further, not only to follow the commandments but to open up even more room in his life to follow them by giving away the treasures he has sought, the life that he has known, in order to more openly follow the way of God. Jesus asks Peter to reinterpret what it looks like to be lacking something, to reinterpret what it looks like to be in need. He instructs Peter that goodness and wealth are not an equal match.

This is one of the hardest gospel teachings to put into accord with the beautiful homes, colorful clothes, and abundance of technologies that we have access to in our modern American lives. Imagining how anyone could ever make such a radical act of reduction and change, even when called by Jesus, can feel like one of those teachings that is only really possible in the Gospel—I assume you may have encountered these before. Those teachings you come across in the Gospel that sound about as possible as the instructions on making a holy temple that come through the intricate old language of Leviticus.

Reading about Jesus telling Peter in their ancient world to shrink his worldly life in order to expand his Godly life can feel like a call that is no longer totally possible, since Jesus was never faced with the kinds of abundance and even the kinds of goodness that our industrial and commercial advancements have made possible. And yet, even as the ultimate instruction to start small and to start over in the ancient world sounds in contrast to our own cluttered and abundant modern lives, there are pieces of the story that feel totally unchanged.

You know what it is to feel like Peter—“what must I do to inherit eternal life?” That question that crops up, even with the clear instructions of the commandments. How can I be sure? How can I make sure that I have inherited eternal life?

And you know what it is to feel that you are still seeking the manifestation of God in your own life, even when you’ve tried to open up more pathways to that eternal life. Even when you are praying more, even when you are living with less, even when you are serving more, you have felt that same frustration of Peter and the disciples, that since it is hard always to be in touch with the Christian life, you want to just make sure that you are doing it right. You, like Peter, often find yourself standing before Jesus, wondering whether you can really trust in God’s grace, enough to find more and more energy to make room to follow Jesus right on into the eternal kingdom, amidst all of the obligations of this world.

New Haven was one of the places I have been called in my life to pick up and go, to follow Jesus, to leave behind what often feels like everything, and it has taken me a little while to find the goodness of this new place. Down at the end of the street where I live in New Haven is a small park with rolling green fields and a lovely greenhouse where this spring I bought some beautiful hydrangeas. The past few weeks there, the neighborhood has been filled with the sounds of the annual “Shakespeare in the Park” performance that draws a casual crowd together in the audience for about two weeks in August. This year, they are putting on a lovely show of Love’s

Labour's Lost, a comedy with lots of fun language and beautiful costumes—you could catch tonight's performance at 8:00 pm.

I saw the show, and the sounds of Shakespeare's English led me down memory lane, to a time when I felt the same urgency that Peter does when he approaches Jesus in this story, the same overpowering desire both to know what is good, and to prove that I am capable of doing good myself. When I was beginning my first year of college as an English major, I was hoping to find a course that felt like a real challenge—something to prove to myself and others that I was good enough for college, that I had arrived as a real college student. So I took an English course on Shakespeare taught by a renowned English scholar, and I dove immediately in to a new world of passionate scholarship and talented students, writing and reading with new intensity.

That same year, my first year away from home, my grandmother was moving out of the house in Deerfield, Illinois that she had lived in for more than forty years. All of the phone calls I received from home sounded just like a rehearsal of these words from Peter, as she and my mother cleaned up the house and passed all of the pieces of their past through their hands. These phone calls that I remember immediately draw to mind Peter's dumbfounded response to Jesus's call—but... "all these I have kept from my youth."

When my grandmother first moved in to her house, she did not like it. Leaving behind a wonderful life in the booming Orlando, Florida of the 1960s in order that my grandfather could take a job in cold, cold Chicago was hard, but the homely little house they found in a nearby suburb made it even harder. It was not as glamorous as the life she had left behind in Orlando, and even so it was going to be hard to pay it off. But, a house was important. The wealth of a house was nothing she wanted to pretend about. She knew how much a house meant, how much it was worth. After all, my grandmother had grown up in Dust Bowl, Missouri, where a hard fought house was about the only thing her family had to count in, to carry them through the worst of it.

So, my grandmother, wondering what she had left behind and wondering what she was following, faced with the frustration of this new, unfamiliar life, threw herself into the process of decorating and redecorating. In fact, her very first effort to transform the place she repainted the basement – you all are familiar with that here – covering ugly wooden panels with a beautiful fresh white paint, trying anything to bring a bit of Florida back with her. And that redecorating process continued over and over again, each room changing a little bit as the finances allowed, until her very last year there, a few after my grandfather had died, when the stairs and the snow shoveling and the weeding were too much, and suddenly she had to sort through all of those

years of projects, in order to make another move to a smaller house in a retirement village, where she could get better care.

And even though we all knew that my grandmother was walking into a better and healthier way of life where she was moving, it was difficult to know what to do with the grief that erupted from us, as we picked up and boxed away all of the beautiful things she had collected as she tried to make that house a home.

So as I began a new life away from home and dove into studying Shakespeare spending my own time sorting through the old and complicated lines of cooky King Lear, I was getting calls about my grandmother's house, hearing the stories that came out as my mother and she stepped outside of the day to day time of their own lives and lifted up each thing from their pasts, sifting through all of the many layers of memories and redecorations that my grandmother had saved in that house.

And as I worked through my first year away from home myself, I listened to our family stories, hearing my grandmother and mother sift through the difficulty of figuring out how to live a smaller and newer life, there was one line of King Lear that stuck out to me, toward the end of the play, when the aging King is beginning to watch his own familiar life fall away and must confront, with a sort of giddy anger, his new, much simpler, much smaller way of being.

His daughter asks him how many possessions an aging king really *needs*, and Lear responds to her with a wisdom he has gained from what he has already accepted in his own world:

O, reason not the need: our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous:
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man's life's as cheap as beast's:

Reason not the need. Please, the king pleads, don't focus only on what is needed. Every person, even the least of these, has something more than they need. There is no way to move toward eternal life by thinking about change, thinking about age, thinking about time, only by asking about what is needed, only by trying to sift out what is good. The king goes on to ask for something more, for patience.

This passage from Lear helps me understand how Peter might possibly find any hope in the instruction by Jesus, to give everything away, to leave everything behind, to trust in the renewing grace of God to be the provider of the richness of life.

As the king, tells his daughter, the wealth of our world is impossible to measure. How can you ever measure needs, when life itself is such an abundant gift? The truth is, that even the darkest moments in our lives, even the darkest corners of our world, are not without gifts, brought by the grace of God.

The work of following God, of moving toward the eternal life has already been fully provided by the gift of God's grace. Fully provided! When Peter asks Jesus what more he can do, what more wealth, Jesus tells him simply to give more away, to leave more behind, because that is all that grace asks of us. Jesus is not asking us all to become monks, living in single cells, saying our prayers and serving the poor—though there is always room to find goodness in that. NO! Jesus is telling Peter that since he has already received so much of God's

King Lear discovers in the reversal of order in his own life, that somehow there is something more to seek—even with all of what he knew changing, he seeks patience, he wants love. This is the task set before all of us as we continue to receive the gifts of hard work and abundant love in our own lives. When we wonder about whether we have received eternal life, when we wonder how we can be sure that God is out there watching and waiting for us, it is because we are not trusting in God's whole, embracing, abundant grace, that is ready to embrace us wherever we go, no matter what hard questions we must ask, and no matter what hard changes we must make.

My grandmother's house in her retirement village is much smaller, much newer, and yet, she is much happier there, surrounded by a community of people hoping to help her and no more need to shovel any snow.

It was through God's time—and our patience—that we could receive the grace of this new life.

And as I read about King Lear in my college course, I found words for the grief that was confronting in my own family, as some how we all reached the ends of our familiar lives at the same point and had to confront a sudden time of ending, in the midst of seeking so much new life. This moment in our family was a reversal of order, a time of weird and winding grief prompted that became a chance to follow that call of Jesus to Peter, not to disappear and not to forget, but to accept the grace of God that he had already been given, to follow God's commandments with patience, and to live into an ongoing call to leave behind possessions, to put away the past, and to walk into an uncertain, but grace-filled future because through God all things are possible. Amen.