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Mark 10:17-31
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Don't call me Good

We have all heard this story of the wealthy man who comes before Jesus. Matthew calls him young. Luke calls him a ruler, and Mark calls him rich. Regardless of what we call him, When this young rich man throws himself before Jesus asking what he needs to inherit eternal life, Jesus says he must do something that is easy and something that is hard. It is easy to follow the commandments, to refrain from doing evil to others. But it is difficult for us to be foolishly generous and give up everything we own to benefit others.

Still, I am sure that you all know this. You don't need me to tell you that the Bible says, sell everything you own and give it to the poor. You already know that the Bible contains this difficult, some say impossible, commandment. However, I want to focus on something that we sweep over quickly at the beginning of the story, when Jesus says, Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.

Please pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you. Our rock and our redeemer.

I remember not too long ago when I was having a conversation with some people in this church when I explained that I am a Kenegy and that Louis Kenegy was one of my cousins. And nearly everyone's eyes lit up in recognition when I said this. Because Louis was one of the first Mennonites to fight for LGBTQ liberation in the church back in the 1980s. She was challenging the powers and principalities of the church, rattling the doors of the church when most people were not even considering the questions. But why did some of those people's eyes light up? Because they recognized Louis Kenegy? Because they assumed that I would be like her. And to be clear, in that conversation I spoke about Louis to explain how I was trying to follow in her enormous footsteps. But still who our are folks cannot fully explain who we are.

And I wonder if this is how Jesus feels when the rich young man falls over himself, calling Jesus good. The rich young man wants to put Jesus in a box. Calling him a good itinerant rabbi that he hopes will bestow upon him some sage wisdom. But Jesus is so much more than good. Jesus is a revolutionary prophet who is seeking to bring good news to the poor. Jesus is a penniless peasant and a religious minority in the midst of a powerful empire that conquered his nation only a few decades ago. Jesus is so much more than just good.

Moreover, who is good anyway. Jesus says that only God is good. To be clear, the word good appears 102 times in the New Testament, usually referring to someone's good fruits or good

actions. But I think Jesus has a point. Who are we to call someone good when people are so much more than just good or bad? Imagine with me how we can get ourselves in trouble with this “good person” language. We humans are pattern recognition creatures, so we like to put people and things into categories. Fruit is tasty, barking dogs are dangerous, and if you like someone’s cousin you’ll probably like them too. Putting things into categories is a shortcut that helps us out a lot in life. It is good for us to know that the next fruit we pick off the tree will probably taste a lot like the last one. But when it comes to figuring out if humans are good or not, our shortcuts can fail us.

I wonder if Jesus rebukes that young rich man because of how he went about deciding that Jesus was good. What does that man know of Jesus? A few stories? Maybe a good first impression after hearing one of his sermons? Does the rich young man even know Jesus good enough to make that judgment call about how good or bad Jesus is? How many times have one of us made the judgment call about whether someone is good or bad based upon a single impression?

But I think there is a more basic point that Jesus is trying to make. Every human, regardless of how good we think they are, is capable of great evil. And every human regardless of how bad we think they are, is capable of redemption. No. None of us are good. None of us are perfect. But all of us are created in God’s image. All of us are beloved children of God.

So let us not call each other good or bad. Let us assume that we cannot categorize each other into such small boxes. But instead, recognize that we are all amazing, complicated humans that are capable of both great evil and great good. That we are more than our first impressions or our family members. We are beloved children of God. Nothing more, nothing less.

How does this beloved status change how we read the rest of the text here.

Does it allow us to have pity on the young rich man who cannot participate in God’s plan for creation because he has too many possessions?

Does it show us how to have solidarity with the poor, calling us to generosity?

Does it open our hearts to the complicated, revolutionary Jesus, who looks upon all of God’s children with love and compassion?

Does it lead us to the humble recognition that we are not perfect, but the fact that God loves us despite our flaws fill us with recognition that we are deserving of human love as well?