

# Sermon

**Preacher** | The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring

**The Gospel** | Mark 10:17–31

**Date** | October 10, 2021



**ALL  
SAINTS'**  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

A few years ago I took a week's coaching training alongside a cohort of pastors from a range of Christian denominations across America. We were holed up on the coast of Texas, sat in a circle for hours at a time in a non-descript hotel meeting room. The training involved a lot of role plays, working on coaching scenarios where one of us would be the coach and the other with an issue that they wished to examine. Apparently, the key to being an effective coach is to identify what our coaching gurus call 'the powerful question'. In all honesty, for us newbies, it was a rather painful week that saw us strain all available sinews to find that perfect combination of words that as hard as we tried always seemed to remain elusive. All the while our trainers would sit there, silently observing us writhe around. Every so often we would sneak a glance in their direction and see them wince at a particularly numb-skulled interrogation or nod in approval when we were closer to the mark. I suppose, like everyone else, I improved over the course of the week, but when the opportunity was presented to become a certified coach by fulfilling 100 training hours with unsuspecting volunteers back in Atlanta, I politely declined. I didn't need another hundred hours to get the point, namely that asking the right sort of questions in life can be the difference between staying stuck where we are and the freedom to move onward.

The trouble for our friend in the gospel reading from Mark today is that he comes to Jesus with the wrong question. He asks, 'what must I do to inherit?' It's a good question, perhaps, to ask of a financial advisor, or of an attorney. But not Jesus. Perhaps we should be more sympathetic toward the man. After all, his inheritance question is about eternal life, and Jesus is from all appearances a religious leader. In other words, Jesus has what this man wants: answers. The trouble is that the man has clearly not been paying attention to the kind of answers Jesus has been offering. When asked, 'how might I receive', Jesus invariably answers 'how might you give'. The man's question is about the storing up of things, like his many possessions we learn of later in the passage. It is a question that is looking for guarantees. His problem is that he is asking to get a hold on the un-holdable. Eternal life is a gift, not an acquisition.

So how do we learn to ask the right questions?

One of the ways we can do that is to open ourselves up to the questions of others.

In a little while you will hear a video message from Carl Walker, a much beloved member of this parish whose life journeys from his personal experience of a segregated South to his yearnings for racial reconciliation in America today. Part of Carl's stewardship in this church community has been his commitment to racial healing through the power of relationship. His work and that of others through the Micah Project matters to this church because it forms us to ask the right questions of and with one another.

We know that questions about race can be hard for people to confront. Yet for decades, this has been a church that has walked toward not away from difficult conversations and challenging questions. It was all the back in the 1940's when my predecessor, Matthew Warren, first drew a connection for this parish to the plight of black Atlantans in his open opposition to the poll tax. Two decades before Frank Ross, Ralph McGill and Elbert Tuttle engaged All Saints' in the civil rights struggles of the 1960's, this parish was already becoming a place where we asked questions of one another that had the capacity to do their good work in us and through the lives we lived in this city.

All Saints' is the church that it is today because we are a people that has been able to ask questions that matter. Here, we have learned that courageous questions are not only welcome but essential to the strength and health of the church, questions that have indeed helped us move onward when we have found ourselves stuck in place.

Yet we also know that the questions we ask can be lifelines to those beyond this parish looking for light in dark places. Giving courageously of ourselves by staying with the right sort of questions helps others see from the outside looking in that there is hope for them too.

This Sunday is Pride Sunday in Atlanta, and if it weren't for Covid, we would have marched along Peachtree to Piedmont Park, beads in hand, sharing the joy of the inclusive and beloved community God calls all people into. As much as we might take pride in the progress our society has made in the work of equity and inclusion for people of all sexual orientations and identities, we know that there are still many who find themselves shrouded in darkness, including in how they see themselves in the eyes of God. As with Job who asks in our reading today why God is so elusive in times of fear and doubt, there are too many who facing discrimination and exclusion say to themselves, 'If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!'

We know that we are still far from the promise of the kingdom of God where all God's people will be free to love and be loved as God created them. And so we need to remain a steadfast beacon of hope for the LGBTQ communities and individuals of this city and we need to remain committed to ask questions of one another when people around us are made to feel less than the beloved creations of God that they are.

We know, then, how important it is for us to be a people who ask questions; essential for our life as a parish and essential for the lives of those we have yet to know and love. Yet we should be careful that in the celebration of our questioning character that we don't slip into hubris. For in the life of faith, questions that really do have the power to move us are not the product of a keen intellect or of rigorous debate. They are the fruits of our trust. We develop a vision for questions that in the words of Hebrews will be 'able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart' when our hearts have committed themselves to where they most belong.

Our friend in the gospel today is so off the mark with his question of Jesus because he has missed the thrust of Jesus' invitation: that the kingdom of God is only enterable by dispossessing, by letting go, by entrusting our way in the world not to our own power but to God's grace. When we can find our feet on that path then we will begin to lose the need to ask how we can inherit, or how we might gain, and instead ask a whole new set of questions about who we might become as we learn to trust just how deeply it is that grace will lead us home.

As you pray about your pledge to All Saints' and ponder what place this church has in your life – all that it means to you, and all that you are becoming because of this community – I invite you to think of that pledge as an expression of where you place your trust. Where will you entrust the deep questions that call to deep in your life? And what grace-filled question most needs asking of you today and of our life of faith together? As much as we might find ourselves like the rich young man longing to know where the future will take us, we can trust that in God all of our questions find a fruitful home. May you be blessed in the asking of what presses most upon your heart this day, and may you be a blessing in all that you choose to entrust to the God from whom all blessings flow.