This past Tuesday would have been John Lennon’s 78\textsuperscript{th} birthday. For those among us who still tune into these things, the occasion brought the reissue of his most famous post-Beatles work: the song “Imagine” and its album by the same name.

The singer and the song conjure different reactions among us. Whether you consider him talented, loved, inspirational, or, controversial, rude, naive, chances are you recognize his name, his voice, and likely this song.

“Imagine” on one level is a utopian lullaby of a lyric: a beacon of tolerance, unity, and hope to some, and an offensive repudiation of all things political, national, and religious to others.
Whatever our respective opinions, we can objectively say that “Imagine” invites listeners to let go of how people choose to identify and distinguish ourselves from one another. In so doing, we are left to clarify what matters to us: what is it we value?

For those of you who may be worrying in your pews, this is not a sermon about John Lennon. His most famous solo song, however, was the fitting soundtrack as I read and reflected on our Gospel reading from Mark, which our NRSV subtitles “The Rich Man.”

In the non-stop action that is the Gospel of Mark, our story picks up right where we left off last Sunday. Fresh from having encouraged the adults to emulate the purity of heart of children, Jesus and company continue their journey onward. We are told Jesus is confronted by a man who asks what he must do to inherit eternal life.

This sounds like quite a significant appeal. “Give me the How-To manual, Rabbi, so I can be sure to get on God’s good side. I want to be sure to stay off the ‘Naughty List.’” Jesus draws from the Commandments.
Based on the man’s reaction, we wonder if now he feels “safe.” “Phew, thanks, Jesus. I’ve kept all those Commandments since I was a kid. That’s what I was hoping you’d say.” Maybe he even thought, “That’s what I thought you’d say. I was right all along. Thanks for confirming it for me, Jesus.” It’s the 2000-year-old version of, “That’s great news! I went to Sunday School, got confirmed, and now, as an adult, I go to church. I’ve got it made!”

Jesus, however, notices something is missing, even though the man has seemingly done all the right things. Checked off all the right boxes.

If we let ourselves linger in that moment, we wonder if part of Jesus would have liked to “let it go.” Maybe he could have agreed that the man followed the letter of the Law. He didn’t kill anybody. He honored his vows. Didn’t lie, cheat or steal. He even sent a card on Mothers’ Day!

Today’s passage does not say that Jesus gave the man a thumb’s up and told him to go on his way. To do that may have been easier for Jesus. It could have kept his journey from being slowed. If that had been what Jesus did, to be honest, it would have been easier for us, 2000 years later.
The man on his knees, and we, could have been satisfied that doing the bare minimum would be enough to gain God’s favor, to gain “eternal life.”

So, what prompted Jesus to say more, to ask more, to instruct more? Mark tells us: *Jesus loved him.*

As far as we can tell, the man had not met Jesus before this encounter. He is not a relative or close friend. Jesus looked at him and **loved him.**

Jesus loves us **enough to meet us** where we are and loves us too much to leave us where we are. Jesus makes the deliberate choice to recognize and respond to our need.

What, after all, **IS “eternal life?”** The term does conjure up the Gospel of John notion of **eternal life meaning Kingdom living here and now - implying a quality of life rather than an infinite quantity of life** - but we are not in John here; we are in Mark. Still, food for thought: even Mark’s Jesus does not say in order to inherit eternal life you have to die first!

*Perhaps a helpful way to describe “eternal life” is as a life that belongs to God; Life in God’s eternal presence.*
Henri Nouwen gives us this beautiful vision of eternal life:

Jesus says: “Dwell in me as I dwell in you.” It is this divine in-dwelling that is eternal life. It is the active presence of God at the center of my living – the movement of God’s Spirit within us-that gives us eternal life.

Remember, Mark tells us the reply Jesus gives the man comes from a place not of scolding and banishing judgment: Jesus speaks from the place of love when he tells the man what he is lacking in his quest for eternal life.

Go...sell...give...follow me.

Those are directions. Those are action verbs. Do we have any English teachers in the house? (If so, I invite you to sign my petition banning the practice of ending sentences with prepositions!) Seriously, Jesus tells the man he lacks one thing, then proceeds to give him directions to DO four things.

It is only at this point in the story, when we are told the man departs, shocked and grieving, that we discover the man is wealthy, with many possessions.
The general assumption is that the man, now we can say the rich man, left never to return. Perhaps he questioned having kept the Commandments all those years. “I followed all the rules! I did all the right things! I even honored my disagreeable father all those years...for nothing?!”

Maybe that is what happened. We don’t know. We also don’t know if he went away and, eventually, his grieving transformed him! I may not be in the highest tax bracket, but the idea of divesting of all my possessions is daunting. My guitars? Baseball cards, caps, and jerseys? My CDs? My books?

When we make this passage personal, rather than pointing a finger at the rich man, we are confronted with the notion that to imagine no possessions could mean refusing to be possessed by things.

What if, instead of focusing on the possessions at all, we instead perceive today’s Gospel passage as a message of humility and God’s grace?
The stumbling block for the rich man was the idea of letting go of his legalistic “follow the rules” practice when what he needed was to practice a generosity of heart, a sensitivity to the world around him. He was well versed in what “NOT” to do; Jesus told him what he needed to begin doing.

To borrow again from Henri Nouwen: The Greek word for faith means trust – to trust that the ground before you on which you never walked is safe ground...That is the walk of faith – walking with the Lord, always walking away from familiar places...You will live eternally because Jesus is the Lord of life. That is the ecstasy. You can start participating in it every time you step out of your fear and out of the sameness.

Quite possibly, part of us is not unlike the rich man. We want to focus on securing our own salvation. Jesus tells us what he told the rich man: focus on loving God and neighbor. We are told Jesus loved the man who asked today’s question. He loved him enough to tell him the one thing he lacked – compassion, that is passion with his fellow people – is what was missing in his life.

Imagine all the people sharing all the world...
You may say I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one.
I hope someday, you’ll join us,
and the world will live as one.
