

The Church of the Pilgrimage
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November 4, 2018

Mark 10:17-27

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.'" "Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy." Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!" The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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 G God." The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."

All Things Possible

This week, as they were shoving more donations more treasures into the Harvest Fair closet upstairs in the John Robinson Center I jokingly informed Susie Passmore and Jane Dolan, our Harvest Fair Chairs that I was getting ready to preach a sermon against our having so much stuff. They glared at me and told me it would be decidedly bad timing.

Later in the week, I got to thinking maybe it *wasn't* the best scripture for today. I mean, if right here today, this afternoon, you followed Jesus command and gave away *everything* you owned, sold it and gave the money to the poor, well, not only would that be bad for stewardship season, for the church but our future church fairs would be in peril. There would be one very empty attic treasure room. And if you gave away everything you had and sold it all to the poor you'd have no money to come and buy the chicken pot pies, the cider donuts, the Jamiesons fabulous meatballs or all those jars of jelly and that would be really, *really* bad.

My mother said to me on more than one occasion, "I don't know how you do it Helen. Ministers and stewardship sermons – isn't it like singing for your supper?" I want you to know – she, my mother, got lots of things right, but not that one. For preaching on stewardship , what I am doing today *isn't* singing for my supper. It isn't like that at all. For one, it's not like I am saying something to you that wouldn't apply to me, which singing for my supper would be because you all would be the "pay up" team in that equation, and I would be the recipient, the supping one.

I do not want to speak to you today as the “pay up” crowd. I want to begin this stewardship sermon with an intention (which is what the yoga teachers say: “Have an intention for your time on the mat. What do you want this time to be for you?”) What I hope this time together, this reflection together, might be for us --- for all of us, myself included -- is a time to reflect upon Jesus invitation for us to grow in our giving. Because in the end, I think that is what this passage is all about.

A preacher could spend a lot of time with this text telling you there is something wrong with the man, the “rich young ruler”, right from the start. He is too self satisfied, too sure he’s following all the rules. He thinks in a reward system kind of way, and is trying to secure for himself something called “eternal life”. But what we should notice the most is the way Jesus looks at him. Jesus looks at him *and loves him*. Like all the other people who approached Jesus with questions or with needs for healing, this person who kneels before Jesus is first and foremost a child of God. So Jesus is concerned for his wellbeing. Jesus wants the very best for him.

“You lack one thing: go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and follow me.” Jesus didn’t say this to everyone, but he said it to this man. And the man walks away sad, for he has great wealth.

It’s interesting that people often assume end of story. The man goes away and he cannot do it. But what if he went away sad precisely because he fully intended to follow Jesus, *and therefore he was going to do what Jesus asked?* Perhaps then he wasn’t thinking so much about losing great grandma’s jewelry, or giving up the precious antique that had always been in the family or even giving up his house and his other holdings. Perhaps what most concerns him is giving up the status and sense of security that wealth brings. You know, the way people looked at him. The way he got the best tables at the tavern. The way people listened when he spoke, and the way in which he didn’t have to worry about where his next meal was coming from. His wealth gave him a kind of protection from anxiety, at least it seemed to function that way. And Jesus was asking him to let go of that, to give it up and follow him.

I’m sure you noticed that the story isn’t just about Jesus and his encounter with a young prosperous man. It’s also about the disciples and how they grasp, or struggle to grasp this particular encounter. Remember in Jesus day, wealth was seen as sign of a blessing – and favor-- from God. This is why the disciples are so perplexed by Jesus words and his teaching, because they’ve never really thought of wealth as a problem. And what’s the problem anyway? Only this: human nature. That as we accumulate riches, we are tempted to trust in our possessions and our powers of acquiring them, rather than in God for our ultimate security and comfort. (James Thompson, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, volume 4, p. 166) The problem is our relying on ourselves rather than on God. The problem is how difficult it can be for us to relinquish the sense (the false sense) of control that money brings. As one commentator has put it: Rather than issuing an impossible order, Jesus loved this man so much that he helped him see the impossibility of trying to save himself.”

(Preaching and Stewardship: Proclaiming God's Invitation to Grow, Craig A. Satterlee, p. 46) Jesus looked at him and loved him – and then issued an invitation, An invitation to a different way of holding himself and his life, An invitation, simply, to love God more.

Stewardship is not so much about supporting a church budget as it is about what we give our energy to, and how we define ourselves. It is a discipline, a spiritual discipline, to give money without using it for control. And we are all of us growing in our capacity to do this. In bible study this week someone shared that there are often years when they are tempted to say we have reached a plateau in our giving. No more. Then her husband says “but we have been blessed.” And she finds her heart softening. She knows he is right. And this by the way is not a family that has had it on easy street of late. But her husband knows: our giving is a reflection of our gratitude and of our desire to keep trusting in God in both good times and bad. Sometimes we really need to give not only to show gratitude, but so that our tough times don't become what defines us.

I think this is what motivated the widow to give her “mite”. She was poor, but she knew her heart could be scared and shrunken, or her heart could be open to the possibility of God at work in her life and what she gave helped shape her, shape who she was inside.

I found it fascinating that when we visited Montserrat, this monastery outside of Barcelona, Spain where monks live in community high on a mountain top there was a room there that our guide took us into. Now Montserrat is said to have healing powers, and many people come there to pray for healing for themselves or for people they love. When they come the first time, they are told that they must return. They must return with something to offer of themselves, a response to the healing that comes to them. So some return and give money. But others bring more tangible, symbolic things -- in this room we entered there was a kind of rack on the wall to hang things, and all around this room there were baby bibs, and tiny baby shoes for those who had struggled with infertility, or prayed for the wellbeing of a baby. There were notes and crosses, items of clothing and crutches -- all kinds of things that symbolized gratitude for healing and wholeness. It made me wonder: were the monks onto something, namely that part of our move toward greater wholeness is making time to have a response of gratitude?.

Stewardship is about practices. Intentionality. It is about how we embody gratitude, and how our giving shapes us. I recall a not so happy moment in a church I served as an interim. It was a few Sundays past stewardship season, and the chair of the committee and I were standing by a staircase when a woman came by, a woman who served on the stewardship committee. “Dottie’ the committee chair said “we don't have your pledge card yet.” (her name wasn't Dottie) “Oh,” she said, with a cheerful wave of her hand “Just put down what I gave last year.”

For weeks we'd been offering up messages, asking people to be thoughtful about their giving, to give thanks to God for the blessings they'd received. This woman was

thoughtful...for about two seconds. The irony was this woman, who had been quite a powerful career woman, was just moving into retirement. It was going to be quite an adjustment for her, to not have the regular affirmation that comes with doing a job well. It might have been a year to stretch herself spiritually. My life is changing, but I trust in you God to lead and guide me. I know I am more than the work I've done, and I trust in you God to shine your grace upon me, to help me discover more fully who I am as a precious child of God. It might have been a very good year to give and trust in God to work some changes within.

The other night we had an amazing service here at the church -- in response to the violence perpetrated against the people of the Tree of Life congregation. It was a great demonstration of love, something much needed in these times, and something that meant a great deal to the Jewish community here in our town. Our giving to the church is our giving to God's work -- part of which is holding services like this, services that reach out to our wider community and bring people together. Our giving is a way *we show love*, for God and for this faith community that means so much to us. Just as the service shaped us, helping us feel not so powerless, not so hopeless -- just as the service helped us feel part of a larger movement toward human kindness and understanding, made us feel part of efforts everywhere to resist bigotry and hatred, just as the service shaped us, so our giving shapes us. We are not people whose value is determined by our bank accounts, or by what we do for work. We are not people formed by reaction to the latest upsetting news. We are people formed, people whose identities rest in the waters of baptism and the bread and cup of this table. Our identities, we might say our true identities, are at stake in stewardship.

Jesus looked at him and loved him. What if, as we considered our giving to God's work here at the church, we began there, that is to say, with the knowledge that we are each of us God's beloved children. What if we became convinced that Jesus in love is offering us greater freedom so that what defines us is not our stuff, or even the shape of the world around us and how we react to that. Jesus told a story once about a man and his barns. Rather than owning the barns, the man became possessed by his possessions. He was going to tear them down to build even bigger barns, but that very night his soul was required of him.

But this story today is more hopeful. The man leaves, to consider who he wants to be, and Jesus has this conversation with his disciples. He's hoping to open their eyes, so they don't just accept the idea that rich people have it made in the shade, and that's all there is to it. To follow me, Jesus says, you take on a whole new identity. You have to give up control. And that's harder for some people, maybe particularly rich people. And if you hear this, and say to yourself, as I often do, "I'm not rich" we should all pause and consider that from a whole world perspective we are. Do you have a home? Clean water? Food to eat and clothes to wear? We may have anxiety about money, I am pretty sure the way it works is that we all do -- but we are all of us rich by the world's standards.

Who then will be saved? The disciples ask. "With human beings it is not possible," Jesus says. But with God all things are possible."

So now I will get a little personal. For years now Mike and I have given to our respective churches, and now that he is retired, to this, our church, at a level I did not think possible. I am like that wife in bible study, and he is the husband who just seems to trust in ways I am not always quick to trust. He grew up in the family that tithed, gave ten percent – a biblical practice....and a sermon for another day. We are not quite at that level, ten percent of our income today. I've learned, however, that we are in the top five givers in this congregation. Just saying -- I don't think we are in the top richest families in this church.

That my friends, is a gentle prod from your pastor. I do not believe that we are tapped out in our giving in this congregation. I believe this is an area in which we are all called to grow.

I want you to hear how this is a journey for me too. This scripture is really about transformation. About our relinquishing control and letting down the barriers. About God getting in and making a difference, in here. When we practice biblical stewardship we invite God more fully into our lives, and God is able to do that transformational work. And when it comes to showing our gratitude, it is time and talent *and* treasure, all three.

I believe my journey as a disciple and my journey home to God and your journey too will always be in the end about trust, and about finding more and more ways to give our energies and our resources so as to participate in God's work in the world.

And I am seeking a deeper trust that what Jesus says is true: With human beings it is not possible. But with God all things are possible.

Amen.