

Sermon for October 10, 2021—"All In"

28th Sunday in OT, Year B – Text: 1 Timothy 6:6b-19; Mark 10:17-31

It's officially Stewardship season and wouldn't you know it, here comes that rich man again, running up to Jesus with a question about eternal life. We can hear Jesus' dreaded words, even as the man approaches: **"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."**

Even before Mark tells us so, we know that the rich young man will turn away grieving, for he had many possessions. And some of us grieve with him as we see him leave, we know his choice could easily be ours as well.

A pastor remembered, reading the story for the first time. She was ten years old and it was a Sunday school assignment. She was reading it in bed, just before going to sleep. When she got to verse twenty-five—the one that rates the chances of rich people going to heaven as being practically non-existent—the girl was so alarmed that she slammed the Bible shut, jumped out of bed and runs downstairs to where her parents were watching TV. "Mom! Dad!" she yelled, "Jesus says that rich people don't go to heaven!" "We're not rich," came the response. "Go back to bed!"

As she recalled the story, she remembers thinking that she knew better. She remembers thinking her parents might not have been completely honest with her. She knew she had all she needed and plenty more besides. In seminary, years later, she'd learn of ways to soften the text. But the little girl inside her knew that these words of Jesus, when taken seriously—as they must—were clear and hard and scary.

Today's gospel reading hangs on the question of eternal life. The rich man wants to know how to **get** it. The disciples want to know who can **have** it. The good news that Jesus offers is this: **"For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."** Though it may not sound like it this is a healing story. Let me explain...

The rich man runs up to Jesus and kneels, just as others seeking Jesus have done throughout Mark's Gospel. This shows that the man's both eager and sincere. Still, he's the one person in Mark's gospel who rejects the healing being offered. **"Jesus,"** in response, **"looking at him, loved him."** Matthew and Luke leave this out. Not Mark.

But what healing does the man need? What does he lack? Well, what he lacks is that he doesn't lack. This man's possessed, not by his convictions, not by his commitment to God, but by his possessions. Jesus is offering to free him of these—to cure him of his excess. But the rich man turns and walks away, grieving, Mark tells us. I imagine Jesus grieved as well.

So—what about us? What do we make of this story? I'd imagine that most of us, myself included, have managed to accumulate quite a bit over the years. And we've likely heard this passage more than a few times. So, are we possessed by our possessions? Are we refusing to be healed by Jesus? Is our stuff getting in the way of following Jesus? And while we're on the subject, what exactly is our attitude toward money and giving anyway?

In many ways we must—as Jesus has told us—become like children. Hopeful. Teachable. Trusting. Add generous to that list. Generous to a fault: willing to share what we've been given with others.

There's a story of a pastor who'd been speaking in a church in Oklahoma. Afterwards, an elderly Native American man approached him. He was holding a large and elaborate belt buckle, made of silver and turquoise. "Please accept this gift," he said. The pastor was taken aback, but quickly responded. "Thank you—it's beautiful. But I can't accept it." "Why not?" asked the older man, looking puzzled. The pastor laughed and said, "Well, would you want to call attention to this"—pointing to his waist—"with a large, beautiful belt buckle?" The man did not smile. He simply extended the belt buckle again. "Please accept this," he said again. "I'm sorry, it's just too expensive," the pastor said, which was actually closer to the truth of why he'd said no. "You know," said the man, "you can always give it to someone else." The pastor accepted the belt buckle.

Okay, so why does it rarely occur to us that the things of this earth aren't meant to be held onto but given away? This is the central point of today's gospel reading: that the gifts we're offered in life are to be humbly received and joyfully shared. They're not a commodities to be purchased, nor are they prizes to be earned. It's hard for the prosperous to enter the new life God offers, because riches often create more options and, subsequently, more problems. Priorities can—and will—change.

Let's face it, the more stuff we have, the better we feel about ourselves on any number of different levels. And the better we feel about ourselves, that is the better we feel about our ability to get stuff—and thereby be the masters of our own fate—the less we feel we need God, let alone other people. And the dark side of this is that satisfying our appetite for more can have devastating consequences for those who have less. Why? Well, because when ones worth is based on what one has, knows, or achieves, then those who have little, by society's standards, can become worthless and expendable. They become objects of scorn, neglect, and abuse.

So, once again, as it so often does with Jesus, it all comes down to our attitude and priorities. How we think about our money and our stuff, as it's reflected in what we do with it. The passage that addresses it best is probably the most mis-quoted one in the entire bible. Not coincidentally it was in our first reading. Anyone know which one I'm talking about? It's 1st Timothy 6:10. Most people think it says that "money is the root of all evil." Actually what it says is that "**...the love of money is a root of all evil.**" And I believe that this is true whether you have it—money, that is—or not.

Jesus knew how the young man felt about his wealth and possessions, and that's why he told him: "**You lack one thing...**" Now, Jesus wasn't calling the rich young man to some strange kind of esoteric spiritualism and abandonment of the physical world. No, he was calling him to move from one kind of materialism—the self-absorbed kind—to one that focuses on **others'** needs; in particular, their **material** needs.

But materialism works both ways and is why I believe this story speaks to everyone, whether we consider ourselves rich or not. Because there are just as many people **without** lots of money or stuff, who are obsessed with **getting** one—or both. They're every bit as self-absorbed as those obsessed with not **losing** their money or their stuff. And the rest of 1st Timothy 6:10 says that "**...in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many pains.**"

And so, the problem of being rich and getting into heaven isn't just a problem for the Warren Buffets, the Jeff Bezos, and the Bill Gates of the world. It's a problem for everyone!

Frankly, we here in the United States all have a lot and we like what we've got. We like our stuff. What's more, we're bound and determined to keep it and to have even more if possible. Some might disagree. Some might say, like the parents in the story I told earlier, "We're not rich." Actually, though—compared with most others on the planet—we are.

This struck me on a trip that Jane and I took to New York City while serving at my previous church. We went with the Presbytery there, and the highlight was a tour of the United Nations building. I got an unexpected lesson there on how others around the world live. Compared to the rest of the planet, the vast majority of Americans are either upper-middle income or high income. And many Americans who are classified as "poor" by the U.S. government would be middle income in most other places. On average, most Americans spend \$164.55 a day. The rest of the world? Well—more than half of the world population lives on less than \$10 a day. Around a billion people in the world live with less than a dollar.

It's all about **perspective**—that's the **real** takeaway here.

Wealth, despite what many say, isn't inherently bad, in and of itself. The same goes for wealthy people. But—while wealthy folks are often vilified, it's not always justified because in reality, a relatively small group of wealthy people—actually 4.9%—are responsible for about 42% of all charitable giving. So, what this all means—and to some extent, what Jesus is saying—is that the measure of our **faith** is how we **relate** to our wealth.

Jesus knows the human heart. He knows that the more money and stuff we have the greater the chance we'll be seduced by it, and the **less** likely we'll see them as the tools they can and should be for furthering the Kingdom of God. Jesus knows and understands this, and it's probably why he spoke about money more than anything else.

Think about it.

When we think about money, what do we think about? I mean, besides how to get more? We think about our bills, our savings, our 401K's—and it's largely because of the sense of security they provide. Most of us are afraid of not having enough—now or later! When we do think about giving, more often than not, it's an afterthought, meaning that we give from what's left over. That's assuming there's anything left.

What then—**are** our priorities? In our own homes and in our church? How do we measure those priorities? If you say "budgets," you're on the right track. But riddle me this: What's the basis for any budget—especially in church? Would you be surprised—if I said **faith**? But faith in this sense isn't necessarily trusting that God will provide **more**, rather, it's trusting that God will provide all that's **needed** to accomplish what God's calling the church to do. In this regard, it's about **more** than how we spend our money. It's about what we do with **all** of our assets—including the building itself. And it may include ways that we'd never considered and may not want to consider.

But I digress. Where was I?

Our priorities—right. Okay, let me put it this way: as we order our priorities, as we live our lives, there are basic rules that scripture says we're to follow. Six hundred and thirteen (613!) to be exact. We're probably most familiar with the first ten.

Besides what they teach us about God and our relationship to God, they offer us a way to live. Some contain dietary restrictions. Some talk about wealth and property. Some are easier than others, but almost all present challenges. Two of the one's with which we're more familiar, speak to what we've been talking about; the ones that say we shouldn't steal, or covet our neighbors stuff.

But seriously—we know we're to give. There's stuff throughout the Bible, in both the Old and New Testament. We usually hear it in the fall—like now. We know what it says about tithing, about giving to God what belongs to God and to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. We're familiar with the story of the widow's few mites—and so on. But despite the fact that we hear it over and over, year after year, it's not very helpful. Not really.

So what must we do? How are we to give?

Well, C.S. Lewis wrote that, "...the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. If our charities do not at all pinch, or hamper us, they are too small." This actually kind of let's us off the hook a bit. I mean—it's a far cry from, "**...sell what you own and give the money to the poor.**" Lewis is—of course—referring to money, but it applies to our time and talents as well. And something tells me that if you really want to give—be it time, talent, or treasure, or some measure of all three—you'll figure it out. Either you'll find opportunities, or they'll find you.

What this all boils down to is this, and here, brothers and sisters, is the first of two things:

The first, which you're heard me say quite often, is that Christian stewardship isn't just about giving. It's an attitude—a lifestyle. It's a way of living, born from our willingness to respond to the gift of Christ; to grow in Christ; to follow Christ. **Our** invitation is similar to the one Jesus extended to the rich man.

The second thing, is that it's "all or nothing." It's not something we can do halfway. It's non-negotiable. There are no loopholes. We're to be fully involved. Fully invested. In other words—all-in.

All in, with joy and relief...

All in, letting go of that which burdens us...

All in, discarding that which distracts us...

All in, following and growing closer to the One who was all-in for us.

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.