

Pentecost 20 B
Mark 10:17-31
“Jesus Loved Him”

Gordon Stewart, age 74, was a retired cabinetmaker and ponytailed loner who had often been seen pedaling his bike around the streets of Broughton, in the U.K—picking up cardboard boxes and bags full of rubbish. One day when neighbors hadn’t seen Stewart emerge from his home for several days, they called the police. Officers broke in only to find a house so full of trash that the only way to get around was through an elaborate series of tunnels running through the filth. The stench was so bad that a police dive team needed breathing apparatus in order to search for Stewart who was found deep inside the unholy labyrinth. Police believe Stewart became disoriented in the mountains of collected stuff and died of dehydration. “Human mole dies of thirst...lost in his own tunnels of trash,” read the headline in the Sun.

Stewart suffered from Compulsive Hoarding Syndrome, a type of obsessive-compulsive disorder that causes people to acquire and hold onto stuff that’s useless or of limited value—stuff most of us would call junk. Compulsive hoarders stubbornly hold onto old newspapers, magazines, old clothing, books, bags, mail, notes and lists and other accumulated junk and even garbage because they believe that they might somehow need those items in the future.

The accumulation of stuff is only a symptom for compulsive hoarders. According to the OCF, the root cause has to do with an acute case of perfectionism. These people don’t like to make mistakes and to prevent making a mistake, they postpone or avoid making decisions. Even the smallest task such as washing dishes or checking mail may take a long time because it must be done ‘right.’ Consequently, they avoid doing many tasks because everything becomes tedious or overwhelming. The OCF estimates that 700,000 to 1.4 million Americans suffer from Compulsive Hoarding Syndrome. These people are often isolated, lonely and in need of help.

I would argue that most of Western culture is no less focused on the accumulation of “stuff.” Oh it may not be “junk,” and it may not clutter our homes to the point of madness, but the constant desire to acquire bigger homes, cars, televisions, gadgets and other high end stuff may be symptomatic of a larger and more pervasive human disease. You could call it greed or avarice or maybe something called “chronic wealth syndrome.” Whatever the name, it has the potential to be no less debilitating or even deadly to sufferers. When the overwhelming desire to

accumulate and hold onto material things begins to dominate a person's life, whether you are in an apartment or living in a palatial mansion, it's a serious problem.

Today's gospel from Mark opens with a case study of a person who is so afflicted. The man is often called the "Rich Young Ruler." Here in Mark, we know that he's a rich man who had "many possessions." We also know that he's a perfectionist — at least when it comes to how he perceives himself in relationship to the commandments. "Good teacher," he says to Jesus, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus gives him the quiz on the Ten Commandments—at least five Commandments plus another that deals with humans' relationship with God and the rich man checks all the boxes. So far, the man is perfect. "I have kept all of these since my youth," he tells Jesus. He has managed to attain a perfect standard—at least in his own eyes, while also managing to acquire a good deal of stuff. In Hebrew thought, prosperity was associated with God's blessing, which was the result of faithful living. To the casual observer, this guy had it all.

But- as comedian Stephen Wright once quipped, "You can't have everything. Where would you put it?" Eventually, we learn that having it all becomes a life-choking burden instead of a blessing. When perfectionism causes us to believe that our worth is bound up in all we achieve and accumulate, we become trapped in a maze of our own making. So it is ironic that Jesus uses a metaphor of a camel going through the eye of a needle to talk about how hard it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. The stacks of stuff that wealthy people accumulate as a means of validating their worth can create an ever narrowing pathway until, eventually, it's impossible to squeeze their way out.

Jesus offers a therapeutic solution. Unlike compulsive hoarders, people with chronic wealth syndrome need only one prescription. Jesus spells it out for the rich man: "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." This last verse usually elicits a couple of responses from both preachers and congregations. "Well, thank goodness, I'm not rich." It must be someone else's problem. Like the neighbors who walked past Steward's home day after day, we might observe our wealthy neighbors and think they're the ones with the problem. The truth is that if you live in the United States and have even a very modest home and income, you are wealthier than 2.7 billion people who make less than two dollars a day. By that

standard, all of us are very rich and, and very likely, want to get richer. This is, thus, a cautionary tale for all of us.

The second response has to do with the force of Jesus' prescription: "Jesus isn't really asking us to give up everything we own, This is hyperbole, metaphor., right? Surely Jesus doesn't want all his disciples to give up everything we own? This man's problem with his possessions requires a much more radical intervention than WE need!"

Well...maybe. But Jesus' words seem to have a more universal application here. Even the disciples caught the force of it. "Look, we have left everything and followed you." In other words, his advice was not lost on them. They had done exactly what he was recommending. Isn't it strange that we think that discipleship shouldn't cost us that much and that we are somehow in charge of our consumerism? Americans seem to want "the American dream with a little Jesus overlay."

Jesus challenges that assumption and his words are convicting for all who follow Him. He calls us to consider how we continue to hoard and hold onto things in our own lives. The question is whether we will seek health and wholeness when we are asked—or continue to pursue the accumulation of wealth and possessions. Only when we are able to see all that we possess as belonging to God will we begin to see the light of the kingdom break through the clutter.

The rich man was missing those first four commandments—the ones about honoring God, about making everything in our lives subject to God. When we take THOSE commandments seriously, we begin to see that our idea of perfection is nothing compared to God's perfection. For God, perfection and prosperity isn't about full houses or wealth or mountains of stuff. Those commandments are all about emptying and giving away and letting go of anything and everything that keeps us from finding the door to God's kingdom.

St. Luke's is holding a yard sale this month. What "treasures "are you willing to part with in order to be unencumbered when the time comes for you meet Jesus? I mean seriously, how many of you have ever seen a U-Haul following along behind a hearse? These words are sobering for all of us would-be disciples. Amen.

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