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October 10, 2021 – 20th Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 10:17-31

¹⁷As [Jesus] was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁸Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” ²⁰He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” ²¹Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “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.” ²²When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” ²⁴And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It 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.” ²⁶They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

²⁸Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” ²⁹Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, ³⁰who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. ³¹But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Have you ever heard a story or watched a movie so many times that you feel like you know it inside and out? Back when our daughter was little, we had several books that she insisted we read over and over again. It got to the point where I felt like I could recite them backwards in my sleep! Perhaps some of you can relate – either with a favorite movie or beloved book.

The funny thing about knowing something so well is that we often don't pay as much attention to it when we see or hear it for the hundredth time. It's easy for us to kind of "zone out" and not listen for anything new in the story. This can be true for everything from a child's bedtime book to some of the more well-known stories in the Bible. Today's gospel lesson could definitely fit into this category for me, because when I first read the text this week, my mind went on autopilot as I thought about its meaning and application to our lives today.

Initially, I read this story and thought of it as one of those passages of scripture that could be used for a stewardship sermon, in which I could preach about the importance of giving to those in need. This story has probably been used by countless pastors or chairpersons of the finance or stewardship committee as a straightforward example of the sacrifices we are called to make as Christians, as we are called to give generously to others out of what God has generosity given to us. When I thought about it like this, my mind instantly jumped to the conclusion that this man went away grieving, because he couldn't bear to part with his wealth in order to follow Jesus. This encounter was then used by Jesus to illustrate how difficult it was (and still is) for people to enter the kingdom of God because of the "things" in their lives that prevent them from following Jesus, and to drive home the point that it is only through God that anyone can be saved.

While I think that is a reasonable way to interpret the story, my mind wouldn't let me stop there. I began thinking about this man's encounter with Jesus and studying it with new eyes and ears. One of the new insights that came to me was: We don't really know what happened to this man. What if the rich man *did* become a follower of Jesus? What if he went away grieving, because Jesus' words had touched his heart, and he was grieving the change of lifestyle that he was about to undertake?

I can't imagine that *every* single person who truly hears Jesus' transforming message and accepts it into their hearts, instantly jumps for joy at the things that might have to change now that they are a disciple of Jesus. For some, it could mean giving up certain kinds of television shows or playing violent video games, because they don't believe that is what should be filling their minds or how they can best spend their time. For others, it could be giving up partying on Saturday nights, or a lifestyle of drugs and alcohol. Some people will find that they need to give up or change some of their relationships, because of the negative influence these people can have on their life. Some of the things that a Christian may give up are not in and of themselves bad things, but if they are idols that are outranking God in their life, they have got to go. A person can experience some grief and loss in this kind of sacrifice, maybe similar to what the rich man faced in this story.

In thinking about the story in this way, it got me wondering *why* Jesus told this rich man to sell all that he had and give it to the poor. Was it simply the fact that these possessions were distracting the man from truly living out his faith, rather than simply following a set of religious rules? Was Jesus using this command as a model for others to care for the poor? Was this a lesson in the true meaning of happiness, which is not found in wealth or fame or earthly status, but in our relationship with God?

The answer is yes – I think that all three of these things could be true. And we could probably come up with many other reasons why Jesus gave these specific instructions to the rich man, but they all boil down to one thing, Jesus said what he did out of love. The text says that Jesus looked at him, loved him, and said, “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.” The irony here is that this rich man probably had just about anything he wanted at his disposal – and yet Jesus

sees that he is lacking something. It was something that couldn't be bought with money – Jesus.

The one thing that the rich man was lacking – was a relationship with God! In this particular case, Jesus told the man to sell all that he had, so that he could follow him. We don't know for certain that his wealth was a stumbling block in his faith; in fact, based on the text, he seems to be a pretty faithful man – at least when it came to the commandments that dealt with his interactions with others. Did you notice that in the collection of commandments that Jesus uses in his response to the man's question about what he must do to inherit eternal life – it is not the complete list (commandments, which the man said he had kept since his youth)? The missing portions are the first few commandments that pertain to our relationship with God. We don't know whether this man frequently gave money to the poor or not. All we know is that Jesus said that one thing was missing – and he could find it when he followed him. Perhaps Jesus responded in this way to illustrate that putting God above everything else is harder to do than all the rest.

If we think about what we are called to do as followers of Jesus – and how hard it is to live up to that calling on a daily basis – perhaps our response would be like that of the disciples, “Then who can be saved?” Which brings me to a well-known prayer written by American Trappist monk, Thomas Merton¹:

*My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.*

¹ <https://reflections.yale.edu/article/seize-day-vocation-calling-work/merton-prayer>

*I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.*

*Therefore will I trust you always
though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.*

The line that stands out to me is “...the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.” It is usually obvious when I mess up – but sometimes it is not as apparent when I think I am doing what God calls me to do, but might actually be missing the mark. Never in my life have I sold everything that I own to give the money to the poor. But even if I tried to come up with a list of all the ways that I have made sacrifices as a follower of Jesus – you and I both know that there is nothing I can truly *do* to earn a place in the kingdom of God. That is ultimately what Jesus was getting at in this story, and why he responds to the astonished disciples’ question with, “For mortals, it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” No amount of money we have, nor any amount of money given to the poor, will be able to buy our salvation. That can only be earned through the sacrifice of Jesus and his giving of himself on the cross for the sake of the world. Like Merton, all we can hope to do is trust God always, recognizing that even our faith is a gift to us from the Holy Spirit.

If we think about what we do as God’s people, gathering together each week, we will realize that we are essentially telling the same story over and over again. The story of God’s loving sacrifice in sending his only Son to forgive us for our mistakes. The story of how God loves us – in spite of what we have done or left undone. The story of how we can’t earn our own redemption, but it is freely given to us as an undeserved gift of God through Jesus. May this be a story that is

familiar to us, but also one that we listen to with open ears and hearts – to hear God’s calling anew in our life. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Made children and heirs of God’s promise, we pray for the church, the world, and all in need.

Uniting God, you call forth different gifts in those who follow you. Encourage us to welcome the diverse benefits and blessings of the whole church in teaching, preaching, prophecy, healing, and more. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Nurturing God, you bring forth crops from the soil and bounty from the trees. Increase the produce of the land and bless all who toil in fields and orchards. Provide for good working conditions and keep them safe. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Empowering God, you offer compassion for those who are overlooked or forgotten. Open the hearts of local, national, and world leaders to show such compassion and love for their neighbors. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Sheltering God, in Jesus you travelled among us without a place to lay your head. Provide safe places to sleep and rest for those who have no place to live. Sustain ministries that offer food, clothing, and peace of mind. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Renewing God, you bring life out of death. Help us part with those things that are no longer beneficial to us and open our hearts to see where new life is budding in our communities of faith. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Eternal God, we thank you for the lives of those who have died. Make us confident in your promise of salvation and support us in our own journey of faith. Bring healing and comfort to those who are sick and provide strength and wisdom for their caregivers. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Receive these prayers, O God, and those in our hearts known only to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**