

Pentecost 20, 10.10.2021

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15; Psalm 90:12-17; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

“The Discipleship of Giving”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

If there was ever a gospel text tailor made to introduce a Stewardship Appeal, it's today's gospel reading about the rich man and Jesus. This story is also recorded in Matthew (19:16-30) and Luke's (18:18-30) gospels. In Matthew the rich man is referred to as a “young man,” and in Luke as “a certain ruler.” This is probably why this story is often called the story of “the rich young ruler.”

Today's gospel is a vivid story, and is one that should cause us to sit up and listen for, as modern 21<sup>st</sup> century people, we are far richer in possessions than the rich man in today's gospel. This story encourages us to struggle with Jesus' radical call to discipleship. We are meant to struggle with the consumerism and commercialism of today's world that far outstrips anything in the New Testament world.

In today's gospel, a rich man asked Jesus, “*Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*” The rich man actually “*ran up and knelt*” before a poor and homeless preacher, named Jesus. This person must have been worried, because there is a sense of urgency to his question. It makes me wonder if we hurry to Jesus in prayer, with our questions seeking his grace. The second thing we notice is that the rich man tried to flatter Jesus by calling him “Good Teacher,” and Jesus immediately recognized it, saying, “*God alone is good.*” The rich man's use of “good” was not aimed at Jesus' divinity, but rather at a human desire to get something from Jesus.

Ever the teacher, Jesus immediately answered the man's question, saying, “*You know the commandments: “You shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, or defraud; and “Honor your father and mother.”*” The rich man answered, “*Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.*” Perhaps you are wondering, astounded like Peter and the disciples, “Wow, if he kept all the commandments, and it was still impossible, then who can be saved?”

In Jesus' response that follows we see that for Jesus, keeping the commandments is simply a start. It is a baseline, of what we might call “being a respectable person.” What Jesus is getting at is that “respectability” is really about *not doing* certain things: not murdering, not stealing, not lying, not defrauding, not being adulterous. Respectability is really about quietly keeping your head down and getting through life without trouble. This isn't all bad, of course, and Jesus acknowledged the man's behavior as commendable by saying, “*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.”*

In this conversation it becomes very clear that being a “respectable person,” someone who doesn’t transgress the commandments, is not enough to inherit the kingdom. Jesus invited the man to begin to do something new – Jesus invited the man to follow him. Discipleship it isn’t simply about the quiet respectability of not doing certain things; discipleship is about giving and doing for others. Notice the shift: Jesus called the rich man into a life of living and giving for others. Honoring the commandments was good training to become a disciple who will now live for others by using all their resources for God, the poor, and God’s kingdom.

Yet told to give his possessions to the poor and follow Jesus, the rich man was shocked, and went away grieving because he had many possessions. I think we can probably all understand his feelings. In addition to monetary wealth, all of us have possessions, some of which carry much meaning for us: gifts, mementoes, reminders of people and times in our lives. We have many things we don’t want to part with. A friend of mine calls this “the weightiness of possessions.” Jesus is asking us to place our possessions in the perspective of justice and eternal life – thereby making them a bit lighter for us to bear and perhaps even to let go of.

There is no doubt this man was a respectable pillar of his community. He was concerned with the Law of Moses; he had worked hard and accumulated wealth; and he had come to Jesus seeking advice. In spite of all this he had doubts about his salvation, and wanted assurance of eternal life. Perhaps he was aware of the words of the prophet Amos, “*Hate evil and love good, and establish justice at the gate.*” Perhaps the poor gathered at the gate of his home, looking for handouts of a few coins, food, or scraps of clothing. Perhaps the rich man was troubled by the disparity of his wealth and the open poverty he saw around him in the world. The rich man came to Jesus seeking assurance that his respectability, obedience to the law and success in life would be enough to inherit eternal life.

Notice that the gospel says, “*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.’*” Jesus’ response was one of love; Jesus response was one of grace. Jesus told him to grow and build upon the training of his youth: Jesus called him into a new life of discipleship. The words “*follow me,*” say it all.

In other words, Jesus is saying the possessions and the maintenance of wealth only get in the way of our discipleship to Jesus. Unless our possessions and wealth are also put to work for God’s

kingdom, we will always want to hold onto our wealth rather than holding onto the precious grace of Jesus.

Jesus was saying nothing new. Like the words of the prophet Amos in today's first reading, wealth was to be used as a resource for the establishment of justice. Wealth is given so that it might be used to help God establish justice in this world. Our hands are to be hands helping God establish justice. Discipleship is not a passive life of quiet respectability, but of tireless faith and effort, working shoulder to shoulder with Jesus in this world in his mission to establish justice at the gate so that no one is wanting, hungry, powerless, or oppressed.

There is a scene in the 1927 novel by Virginia Woolf titled, *To the Lighthouse*, in which the lady of the house, Mrs. Ramsay is knitting a wool stocking to be given to a sick child of the lighthouse keeper, "and together with a pile of old magazines, and some tobacco, indeed whatever she could find lying about, not really wanted, but only littering the room," she would give these away to the poor. What is pictured is a middle-upper middle class household giving to the poor, not out of its wealth, but out of its scraps. There is not enough time here to address the major themes of the Woolf's novel, but what jogged my memory of this novel is the idea of safety in social and economic class and its respectability, something I think that it is easy for us to both understand and to want to struggle against. The rich man who came to Jesus clearly had not thought about using his wealth and his position in the world to change the world to, in the words of Amos, "*establish justice at the gate.*"

Notice that for Jesus, following of the commandments is simply the point of departure for a new life of discipleship. The rich man's respectability is safe, but it is also prideful. Jesus knows this, and tells him that life in the kingdom requires one to begin living for others, to use one's resources for others and for the establishment of God's justice in this world.

What is crucial to see is that Jesus spoke to the rich man out of love. Jesus was not trying to shame him or make him feel guilty. Jesus was inviting the rich man to the next step in his life, a life of discipleship in which he was no longer a quiet bystander, but rather an active participant in God's salvation story. Jesus' call is a call to moral courage for others.

When Jesus said, "*How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!*" the word he used for "wealth," is in Greek "*chremata*" (χρήματα); which means anything that has monetary value. *Chremata* is the storehouse of wealth that all of us possess, which includes the wealth of experience, a wealth of education, the wealth of relationships and networks of people, and

of course the wealth of money.

Today is the kick-off for St. Mark's 2022 Stewardship Appeal, with the theme "Share the Joy." A joyful life involves the discipleship of giving. Giving not from our leftovers, but from our wealth, our possessions, time, experience, talents, and financial resources. By using the word "*chremata*," Jesus is talking about using the entire body of wealth that each of us possesses for God and neighbor, helping to establish justice at the gate and in every part of our lives.

On Reformation Day, Sunday October 31<sup>st</sup>, we will offer our pledge cards for 2022 during the service, along with all pledges received ahead of time. I ask you to prayerfully consider how Jesus is calling you to give of your wealth for God's mission at St. Mark's.

For those to whom much is given much, much is expected. We are far richer than the rich person of 2,000 years ago, and yet there is still no justice at the gate. The disparity between wealth and poverty remains striking in this world. Jesus calls us to feed, cloth and befriend the poor, the stranger, the oppressed, and in doing so to establish justice in the world around us.

Imagine Jesus standing before each of us who have so much. Imagine Jesus looking at all of our possessions. Imagine Jesus looking over our shoulder at our checkbooks and investment portfolios. Jesus turned to his disciples and said, "*How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!*"

Perhaps frustrated like Peter, we say to Jesus, "*Look, we have left everything and followed you.*" Jesus' words to the rich man are also words spoken to us: "*You lack one thing, sell what you own, give to the poor, and come, follow me.*" Jesus is essentially saying, "Live as if each moment is an eternal choice." Give and help as if you are investing in eternity. Think of doing justice and the giving of our wealth in this life as the rent we pay for our room in the kingdom.

The annual Stewardship Appeal is really an annual Renewal of Our Discipleship to Jesus. Jesus calls us to follow him, using, selling, employing all the wealth, possessions and gifts that we have been blessed with for God's work. Life in the kingdom begins in the here and now. Jesus promises that we will receive blessings of a hundredfold in this life and in eternal life.

In the words of Hebrews this morning, "*Let us approach the throne of grace with boldness.*" Let us again boldly answer the gracious call of Jesus, offering ourselves, our time, and our possessions, knowing that we have and will receive a hundredfold in God's grace. Let us boldly follow Jesus, serving others and helping to establish God's justice in this world. Amen.