

Sermon Notes for 10/11/15 (Pentecost 20, 1st week of stewardship emphasis)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Mark 10:17-31

Theme: TOUGH WORDS FOR SERIOUS GIVERS

Hymn: LSB 362 (We Plow the Fields and Scatter)

Introduction: We have an interesting and engaging young man in front of us in today's Gospel lesson, a rich young man no less, a man who had considerable wealth, but also a good man, with a heart for spiritual matters. As Jesus was setting out for a long journey, this young man ran up and knelt before Jesus in order to ask Him a question: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

There are some interesting things about the man's question. First of all, the man knew that Jesus could be expected to shed some light on this matter of eternal life. We don't know exactly what he had heard about Jesus, but he came to the right place with his question. Secondly, the phrase "Good Teacher" would not have been used by the rabbis to speak about any human teacher. "Good" was a term that the rabbis reserved for speaking about God. One scholar notes that there is no instance in the entire Talmud (which runs to over 6000 pages of print) of a rabbi being addressed as "Good Master." Only God was called good, since the term implied absolute sinlessness, complete goodness.

Matthew Henry suggests that Jesus' reply to the young man seems to run along these lines: "If you call me good, believe that I am God; for no one is good, intrinsically good, but God. . . There is none essentially, entirely, absolutely good but one, that is, God. . . He alone can satisfy your longing desires, as in this life with his grace, so in the life to come with his glory; yea, with himself." Henry may have overstated the issue a bit, but the point is clear: Jesus wants this man to consider His claims about who He is. That is the essence of faith, acknowledging that Jesus is Lord, Master, the only good and great One. Jesus wanted this man to take his own words seriously. If Jesus is indeed "good," what does that mean about who He is?

Perhaps most telling is that this young man seems to confuse a couple of matters. He talks about "inheriting" eternal life. But he also asks "what must I **do** to inherit". How would you answer this: What do you do to inherit anything? A few years ago my mother died. She had been widowed two years previously upon my father's death. So my brother and I, as orphans in this world's terms, inherited some things, including some money. What did we do to inherit? Nothing. We inherited because of who we were related to. We inherited because our mother loved us. We inherited because we were part of the family. We inherited because Dad & Mom had worked and saved and gone without.

But Jesus knew that the man was focused on this doing, so what does He do? Jesus first points the man to the commandments. If you want to know what you must **do** to "achieve" eternal life, here is the natural place to look. God's Law is clear. And which commandments does He mention? Here is the listing from Mark's Gospel: "'You shall not murder [#5]; You shall not commit adultery [#6]; You shall not steal [#7]; You shall not bear false witness[#8]; You shall not defraud [or covet, #9 & 10]; Honor your father and mother [#4].'" He quotes from commandments 4-10, which we call what? Right, the Second Table. That is the table of the law that discusses our relationship with our neighbor. And the man's response is that he has been keeping all of these since he was a youth. Since he was old enough to ponder right and wrong, he has no felonies on his record.

Which commandments, then, does Jesus **not** quote in that context? 1-3, the First Table. But He is not going to ignore them. This young man seems to have minimized the meaning of those three, which speak of our relationship with God. In fact, Jesus summarizes the meaning of the First Table, at least for this young man, in the words that follow: "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 young man had a heart issue.

He was a good citizen, an upstanding member of the Israelite community, someone that parents would tell their kids to look up to, a model of behavior. But he had a heart problem. His heart was set on his wealth. So when Jesus challenged him on the life change that would be demanded, “he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.” Notice that Jesus pointed the young man to a relationship with Himself: “Follow Me” is the pinnacle of his demand on this young man. The commandment to love God with all the heart and soul and strength and mind calls us to undivided loyalty to Jesus the Christ.

Today’s Epistle states, “the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” When Jesus speaks, it strikes to the very core of a person’s being, to the innermost stage of our decision-making, our loyalty, our ultimate allegiance. This man’s heart was stung by the Master’s claims on him. He was not ready for the commitment Jesus was calling from him. He was not willing to submit to the very first commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me.” Or, stated another way, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your strength and all your heart and all your mind.” Or, to put it another way, “Love Me more than your stuff, young fellow.” That is where the rich young man had stumbled.

When Jesus said to the Twelve, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God,” He was turning the popular folk religion on its head. That thinking went this way: the more wealth you possessed, the more God seemed to be on your side, and thus you must be a favorite of His. Rather than being a sign of being in the kingdom, wealth is pictured by Jesus as being a potential stumbling block to even entering the kingdom. The disciples wondered about that, “Then who can be saved?”

So are you rich? There is a calculator on “givingwhatwecan.org” that estimates your standard of living relative to the rest of the world. If you make just \$60,000 annually after taxes (which I suspect would be on the low end of our household income), you are among the richest 2.8% of the world’s population, and your income is 25.7 times the global average. Are you rich? Probably few of us would identify as rich, because we compare ourselves against the Bill Gates and the Donald Trumps and the Koch brothers and the Mark Dayton of the world. I suspect the rich young ruler of today’s Gospel lesson would have probably had less raw wealth than most of the people in this congregation today. Yet he is described as being wealthy. But that was not his big issue. Being rich is not the problem. His problem was seeing his riches as a sign of his spiritual superiority, having his heart set on his things, being focused on having and keeping, instead of seeing his riches as a way of serving his neighbor.

Jesus has not called on each person to sell everything we own and give it to the poor. But He has called us to follow Him. And if our possessions, our stuff, our things get in the way of following Him, then that stuff needs to go. Jesus does not just extend this call from a theoretical vantage point. He lived exactly this way. During those three years of public ministry, He had no home, no place to lay His head. He even had to borrow a donkey to ride on Palm Sunday. He relied fully on the Father’s provision. He would not even use His own gifts and powers to turn some stones into bread after fasting 40 days and nights. He lived this way, not just to show us how it can be done, but so that His poverty might be accounted to us, “that we through his poverty might become rich.” He lived as Savior, so that we could be cut loose from our dependence on things and our trust in wealth, so that we could become generous and joyous givers.

Eternal life is not found in having things – or in getting rid of things. Eternal life comes with a living relationship to the Lord Jesus, in following Him above and beyond the siren call of wealth and possessions and stuff. Living by trust in His promises, a faith relationship that empowers us – this connects us to His promise of life that never ends. That is the life to which Jesus called this young man. Jesus knew wherein this man’s struggle lay, but he did not hesitate to invite him into an eternal fellowship. The real transformation was not so much in divesting himself of his things, but in the matter of following Jesus.

That seems to be the sticking point so often.

I can't tell any one of you just what it is that our Lord calls you to leave behind in order to follow Him in serving those in need. But that call comes just as surely as it did to the rich young man. Jesus calls you, "Drop whatever is hindering your response, and follow Me." Maybe your hindrance is the inclination toward tradition, toward keeping things the way they are. Maybe your hindrance is in your failure to appreciate tradition. Maybe your hindrance is in your possessions. How many people reason with God, "Well, of course I can't be in church on those summer weekends, because I have a cabin and I need to make good use of it"? How many reason with God, "Well, God, I know these neighbors of mine need help, but I am so worn out after a hard day at the office, you can hardly expect me to knock myself out for them"?

And Jesus' words, patient yet insistent, ring out in our ears, "Follow Me." He does not insist that you sell everything, but He does invite you to follow Him with a loyalty that outdoes any allegiance to your things, to your family, to your community, to any thing or any person. Follow Me, He invites, into a real and full life. Follow Me, and leave your sins at the foot of My cross. Follow Me, for I have died for you. Follow Me, for that is the path to real and eternal life.

After Peter said, "Look, we have left everything and followed you," Jesus replied that everyone who has left things for his sake and for the Gospel will "receive a hundredfold in this age - houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life." Whatever we have left for Jesus' sake is surely a pittance, compared with the vast riches that we receive in fellowship with our Lord. St. Augustine says, "St. Peter not only forsook what he had, but also what he desired to have. But who does not desire daily to increase what he has? That desire is cut off. Peter forsook the whole world, and he received in return the whole world. They were as those who had nothing, and yet were possessing all things." And we, who in Christ become the possessors of all things, need not complain when He calls us to use what we have to serve the needs of those around us. Whatever you have, whatever you call your own, whatever you seem to count as your profit – all of it finally and ultimately belongs to God and not to you.

Another commentator has put it this way: "He who forsakes his own for the sake of Christ will find others, many in number, who will give him the love of brethren and sisters, with even greater affection; so that he will seem not to have lost or forsaken his own, but to have received them again with interest. . . in the fullest sense, he who forsakes these earthly things for the sake of Christ, receives instead, God himself. For to those who forsake all for him, he is himself father, brother, sister, and all things." What a trade! Isn't it worth whatever we may lose, in order to know the fullness of the love of Christ, who is indeed our life, our hope, our treasure, our heart's desire, our Lord, our ALL?!

We are not in this world as consumers, though every advertising campaign seems to hammer on that point over and over again. Consumption is not our goal as human beings. Service in Jesus' name and for His sake among those who are in need IS our calling. When our stuff gets in the way of that service, then for Jesus' sake we need to dump it overboard and get in step behind Jesus. And when we can make use of that "stuff" to bless our neighbors, what a gift that is from a God who is generous to a fault, a God who gave His very best for you and me when we were still sinners.

Conclusion: Some commentators suggest that the rich young man later came to a new understanding of Christ's invitation and became a follower of the Savior. Whether or not that is true, we certainly learn from his experience in today's Gospel that life is not found in consumption, but in a life of service lived in partnership with Jesus. What is our Lord calling you to drop, to jettison, to get rid of, so that your following of Jesus can be thorough, complete, and whole-hearted? Your prejudices? Your traditions? Your

“pet” sins? Your stuff that has become an obsession? Your fears? Whatever it is, know that Jesus will provide more than enough to fill all that is missing once it is gone from your life. Not only does nature abhor a vacuum. God hates a vacuum also, and He will fill all those spaces that you think are empty with Himself, so that you will be sure that life is yours, life now, life today, life tomorrow, and life eternal. For the sake of our risen Lord Jesus, AMEN!