

Are You All In?

Scripture: Mark 10:17-31/Ord 28B

October 11, 2009

Laura Smith Conrad/Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

Scripture: Mark 10:17-31

10:17 As 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?"

10:18 Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.

10:19 You 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.'"

10:20 He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth."

10:21 Jesus, 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."

10:22 When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

10:23 Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"

10:24 And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!"

10:25 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."

10:26 They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?"

10:27 Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

10:28 Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you."

10:29 Jesus 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,

10:30 who 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.

10:31 But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Proclamation of the Word

Princess Diana once said,

They say it is better to be poor and happy than rich and miserable, but how about a compromise like moderately rich and just moody?

Most of us would be satisfied with moderately rich and moody!

In this story of the rich young man, we want to distance ourselves from the rich man likening him to the kind of wealth allocated to the NFL athletes, celebrities, and the Donald Trumps of the world. But truth be told, most of us in this room by the world's standards are rich. We enjoy luxuries like indoor plumbing and clean drinking water, electricity, and access to medical care. I saw a man carrying a 5 gallon bucket of water over 3 miles at the Crop Walk last Sunday. He experienced what many in our world do every day to obtain drinking water. The reason this Scripture is so threatening is because we can see ourselves in the man. As Mark Twain once said, "It is not what I do not understand that scares me, but what I do understand."

Our epistle lesson for today was read by Kerin in our time of confession. Hear these words again,

Hebrews 4:12 Indeed, 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.

Today's scripture of the rich young man is one of those texts that pierces our hearts and judges us.

In Mark's gospel, the encounter of the rich man and Jesus is one that haunts some. The man, a faithful Jew, runs up to Jesus. The matter is urgent. He asks, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" This man of means, who is used to acquiring what he wants, asks how he might get or obtain eternal life.

First of all, Jesus says, "Why do you call me good, only God is good." A first hint that it is through God's goodness that we inherit eternal life. The conversation continues...the man says he has done everything he can. He has kept the commandments. He has been a faithful and good Jew. The man is asking a very important and ultimate question with sincerity of heart.

Jesus looks at him and loves him. All our ultimate questions are met in the same way. Jesus, who looks at us and knows the thoughts and intentions of our heart, loves us. Jesus shows his compassion towards the man and gives him a way. He says, "Sell all that you own, give the money to the poor, and come follow me." Ultimate questions deserve ultimate answers. In two sentences, Jesus sums up what the man CAN DO.

Jesus has given the man a way, but the man is unwilling to relinquish, "For he had many possessions." The man turns away sad and grieving. He is unable to make that choice for he is owned by his possessions. He **is not quite able to be owned by God's grace.**

We admire wealthy people who do good things for humanity with their money. Undoubtedly, you have heard of the Nobel Prizes being awarded this week. Alfred Nobel established the Nobel Prize in his Last Will and Testament after reading his obituary, which had been mistakenly printed in the newspaper. Alfred had spent his life amassing a fortune from the sale of explosives and munitions, reflected in the obituary that called him "the dynamite king." Nobel was motivated to change in such a way that his life would be defined in a more positive way than the man who knew how to blow things up. His heart was changed by the work of his secretary, Countess Bertha van Suttner, with whom he developed a friendship. She and he were in conversation for years about peacemaking in war-torn Europe of the late 1800s. She wrote a book about the Arms Race entitled *Lay Down Your Arms*. After Alfred Nobel's death she was one of the first recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize. In a way, Alfred Nobel was making amends for the misuses of his invention of dynamite, originally created for construction and blasting, dynamite was being sold for weapons such as land mines.

Jesus is asking for something more here than the improved public image of a wealthy entrepreneur; Jesus wants us to be "ALL IN." There was one little hiccup in the list of commandments that Jesus ticks off to the rich man. Listen to the scripture again.

Mark 10:19 You 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.'

20 He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth."

Jesus says, "You shall not defraud." Do you remember that one? It is not in the 10 Commandments in Exodus 20. As one person at the Sermon Starters Bible Study this week noticed defrauding is the combination of lying and stealing, both commandments. Defrauding has synonyms like swindle, cheat, deceive. In other words, our friend the rich young man may have acquired his wealth by taking advantage of other people. Jesus throws the word "defraud" in for a reason.

In biblical times, there were two classes of people, the poor and the rich. Many became rich on the backs of the poor. It is not an unusual story. The profits of the extremely wealthy are sometimes on the backs of poor folks...sweat shops being one example. Throughout history, reform movements have sought to deal with injustice to the poor. As one writer comments, "... the purchase of goods has been a means of affecting change. The colonists revolted against the Stamp Act of the British Empire by boycotting British goods. This first major, coordinated protest against imperial rule in America not only turned the colonists into Americans, but also defined Americans by what they did or did not buy. To be American was to wear homespun clothes. Material consumption and possession have continued to be the means by which we define ourselves."ⁱ

We live in a market mentality, but Jesus is offering the man a kingdom reality.

Jesus is calling the man to account, asking him perhaps to make amends for his business practices. But more than that, Jesus is calling the man to experience a change of heart. He is calling him into a relationship with the poor and calling him to come with him in a life of discipleship. It is a choice he is unable to make.

As one writer states, "The kind of materialism Jesus calls us to require is not the accumulation of goods, but an engagement with people, particularly people in need. Perhaps the first lesson for us as "rich young men" is to realize the empty promise of our consumption. The second is to follow Jesus in abundant life of engagement with people."ⁱⁱ For the man to give up his possessions and give them to the poor, he would come into contact with people who were different than he. By leaving to follow Jesus, the man was invited into a life which would bring him to encounter the sick, the poor, the hurting...those who know they needed help. But the man in his self-sufficiency is shielded from being dependent on anyone. And for that he was missing out on the kingdom reality that Jesus was offering to him. The man chooses to disengage and loses the thing he knows is missing.

I recently read the book entitled, *Same Kind of Different as Me; a modern day slave, an international art dealer, and the unlikely woman who bound them together*. The true story begins with Denver Moore who grew up as a Sharecropper in the 1940s and 1950s in Red River Parish, Louisiana. He tells of working the cotton fields for thirty years without a paycheck. He lived in a shack

he did not own, had two pairs of overalls he got on credit, a hog, and an outhouse. He worked year after year with no education to give all the cotton to The Man. The story of his life and how it intertwined with that of Deborah and Ron Hall is told in this book. It is a story about faith, poverty, cancer, and hope. It is a story of how their friendship transformed their lives and the lives of many especially those at the Union Gospel Mission in Fort Worth, Texas.

In hopes of healing their marriage, Ron and Debbie commit to their Christian faith with new vigor. They knew they needed God's help. They had lived a very privileged life becoming millionaires through the buying and selling of art, but something was missing and they knew it. Faith drew Debbie to want to serve at the homeless mission downtown. The day they arrived to see the ugliness, the dirty facility, and despair, Debbie dreamed of daisies and a white fence...a place of beauty, a place where people knew that God loved them. Their first day there, Debbie spotted Denver and would not let him go. Denver by then was a homeless, ex-con who had spent many years in the Angola prison. He was not interested in having anyone, especially her, know him. He was an island who needed no one. Debbie told her husband Ron that next morning that she dreamed of his face and thought of the verse from Ecclesiastes about "a wise man who changes the city." She tasks Ron with befriending Denver which is not an easy task. Their friendship grows into a relationship where the two men become brothers- an unlikely friendship which grows into family. Their involvement in the mission grows, too.

Debbie develops liver cancer. A few days after her surgery, they delivered all the flowers from her hospital room down to the mission. Ron was overwhelmed by the care their homeless friends offered.

One guy Tino, says, "We're praying for Miss Debbie. We love her and we want her back."ⁱⁱⁱ Ron was concerned because in the last few days he had not seen Denver. When he entered the mission Jim, the cook said that Denver must be sleeping. Listen to what happens next...

[Read excerpt from p. 138]

"Sleeping! I blurted. Lazy, I thought. It was already mid-afternoon.

Jim raised an eyebrow, "You don't know?"

"Know what?"

"Well, when Denver heard about Miss Debbie, he told me that she had a lot of friends who would be praying for her all day. But he figures she needed someone to pray all night, and he would be the one to do it."

My eyes widened as he went on. "So he goes outside at midnight down next to the dumpster, and prays for Miss Debbie and your family. When I get up and come down here at three in the morning (to make breakfast), he comes in for a cup of coffee, and we pray in the kitchen for her until about four. Then he goes back outside and prays until sunup."

Ashamed, I realized how deeply grew the roots of my prejudice, of my arrogant snap judgments of the poor.^{iv}

What ensues is a deeper understanding between Ron and Denver. They learn from each other and suffer together the loss of Deborah Hall in the end. What they gain though is a significant friendship. Debbie had brought them together in faith, and now their lives are intertwined. After Debbie's death, her vision came true, Denver becomes a leader in the community. He preaches at a church one Sunday. When Ron asks Denver how he wishes to be introduced, Denver says, "Just tell 'em I'm a nobody trying to tell everybody about *Somebody* that can save anybody. That's all they need to know."^v For Denver had learned through the grace of God and the love of Miss Debbie that he mattered in God's eyes. After Denver preaches, Ron reflects on Deborah's dream and seeing Denver's face, and hearing the words of Solomon; "there was found in the city a certain poor man who was found wise and by his wisdom he saved the city." Deborah was right.

Just like Jesus says, the first will be last, and the last is first in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus was calling the rich man into a deeper relationship with others and with God, and the man shocked and grieving, turned and walked away for he had many possessions.

Too bad he was stuck in his market mentality and missed the kingdom reality.

ⁱ Andrew Warner, *The Christian Century*, October 5, 2006, p. 19.

ⁱⁱ IBID.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hall, Ron. *Same Kind of Different as Me*, Tommy Nelson Press, 2006, p.136.

^{iv} IBID. p.138.

^v IBID. p.231.