

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, October 14, 2012
Christ Episcopal Church, La Crosse, Wisconsin
The Very Rev. Canon Patrick P. Augustine, D.Min., Rector
Mark 10: 17-31

I opened my sermon with this statement at 10:30 a.m. service):
(The CEO of ENRON was in good standing with the Episcopal Church. He had been paying his pledge and his rector would write a good testimonial about him. One morning he met Jesus of Nazareth. He asked him, “Jesus what should I do to wash guilt of my conscious to feel right again.” Jesus looked hard in the eye and told him the truth about him. “You owe big time apology and restitution. Under your watch as the CEO of Enron thousands lost their life savings and their pension funds. Many are now in their sixties without jobs or working at the minimum wages to make ends meet. You need to pay back what’s not yours to those whom you have hurt though fraudulent accounting.”)

This text is rich with tensions as the story begins with a question about salvation by an earnest adherent of the law. He addresses Jesus *didaskale agathe* [‘good teacher’]. The rich man asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” We know taking a step into the future can be a difficult task: getting ready for the first day at school, going out on a first date, attending the first AA meeting, talking with a son or daughter about the marijuana in the jean pocket or maybe hearing a call to ministry and literally parting with most of what we have to follow Jesus. Jesus is inviting this man to step into the future.¹ Jesus’ answer to the rich man shocks and dismays the disciples, and it continues to perplex many of us today.

This man tells Jesus he is not a bad man but he has indeed kept/obeyed the commandments since his youth. Jesus says there is one more step you require. I want you to live out those commandments by an action that is more extreme than obedience to the commandments. Faced with this new demand, the man goes away shocked and grieving, unable to fulfill Jesus’ requirement.

Mark, as he writes this story in the gospel has also on his mind Jesus telling earlier the parable of the sower. Some seeds fell on the rocky ground and did not bear fruit. In fact it is the only parable in Mark’s gospel about the discipleship rejection story. Here in this parable this man’s love of possessions chokes his thirst and hunger for righteousness and eternal life. This man, however pious he may be, lacks (*husteri*) one thing. In Jesus’ call to discipleship, the meaning of “self denial” is further concretized in economic terms, articulated in four distinct imperatives:

¹ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors. Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol.4. Pp. 164-169

1. Get up (*hupage*)
2. Sell that which you have
3. Give to the poor (and you shall have treasure in heaven)
4. Come (*deuro*), follow me.

The first command is usually used by Mark in healing stories (1:44; 2:11; 5: 19, 34; 7:29), and perhaps that is part of the invitation here: to be healed of the sickness of accumulation. To take the first steps to inherit eternal life.

The fourth command closely echoes the first call (cf. 1:16). Jesus' call is to move from security of their vocation on to the way of his path. The demand that this proprietor (10:22) divest his assets is not different from asking a fisherman to leave his nets (1:8).

“When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions” (*echon ktemata polla*). A possession is used to describe a piece of landed property. In Mark's Palestine, landowners represented the most politically powerful social stratum. With this revelation, the story of man abruptly finishes, as if the point is obvious. As far as Mark is concerned, the man's wealth has been gained by “defrauding” the poor—he was not “blameless” at all—for which he must make restitution. The moral of the story is that the Law is kept only through concrete acts of justice, not the facade (veneer, outward show, public image) of piety.²

Jesus is not making here a case for rich to be bad people and recommending poverty to his people, because poverty does not deliver one from the love of money. It would be easy to think this text applies only to the extra-rich among us. But nearly all Americans are wealthy. We have everything we need or more. For most of the world, our problems, our debts, our payments would be welcome luxuries. So this passage has something to say to us. What we do with our wealth will determine the spiritual health of ourselves and our families.³ The God of the Bible seems not to mind prosperity—if it is shared. This is a good stewardship lesson.

Jesus did not command the man to become destitute, nor to take on the burden of voluntary poverty. Rather he summoned the man to cut all ties to the things of the world which enslave and tangle him. He invited the man to become free:

- free from having to possess things;

² Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, Orbis Books 2008, Pp. 271-275.

³ R. Kent Hughes, *Mark-Vol. Two, Jesus Servant and Savior*, Pp.61-67.

- free from determining his importance by the size of his land holdings.

One thing is for sure. If we want to follow Jesus, we had better brace ourselves. He calls us to serve a God who loves us, a God who will keep disturbing us until we finally relinquish our grip on our possessions. Once we say yes to God, we can expect holy disruptions in our lives until the day when God alone shall purge and possess our hearts.⁴ That is called living with new heart and commitment in the Kingdom of God. This is good news only for those prepared to let go our only reliance on our achievements, holdings and possessions but trust God and come to faith:

With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God (27).

God to whom Jesus points, and in whom he committed his own trust, does not want some portion of Christ's disciples. God intends to claim them entirely, without remainder or reservation. This is the promise of eternal life. Never is it realized painlessly or without sacrifice for the gospel's sake (10:29), whether by this Christ or by his followers. We surrender our lives and say: Let thy will be done.

All to Jesus I surrender;
all to him I freely give;
I will ever love and trust him,
in his presence daily live.

I surrender all, I surrender all,
all to thee, my blessed Savior,
I surrender all.

2. All to Jesus I surrender;
humbly at his feet I bow,
worldly pleasures all forsaken;
take me, Jesus, take me now.

3. All to Jesus I surrender;
make me, Savior, wholly thine;
fill me with thy love and power;

⁴ William G. Carter, *No Box Seats in the Kingdom*, Sermon on Love and Money.

truly know that thou art mine.
(Refrain)

4. All to Jesus I surrender;
Lord, I give myself to thee;
fill me with thy love and power;
let thy blessing fall on me.

5. All to Jesus I surrender;
now I feel the sacred flame.
O the joy of full salvation!
Glory, glory, to his name!

Remarks of those who received my sermon:

Patrick - many thanks for this one. I was not preaching yesterday and have no past sermon on this passage so I will keep it and use it sometime with due acknowledgement! I hope Myra is continuing her recovery and you flourish.

Yours in Him,

The Rev. Dr. Canon Christopher Lamb (He was my theology professor in the Divinity School)