

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost  
October 15, 2006

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Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

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

Our Gospel text for today is a story that is told in three of the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. There are a few variations from one account to the next, but the story is pretty much the same. Mark's account has the fewest explanatory details, it is almost as if Matthew and Luke are filling in a few places to help the audience understand the significance of this exchange between Jesus and the man who ran up to him with a question.

Mark doesn't tell us anything more than "a man ran up and knelt before Jesus" and asked him a question. "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Later we learn that the man has many possessions, so we ought to give the guy credit. He has many possessions, but he seems to know there is something more, more to life, more to being right with God. And he knows that Jesus is the right person to ask. He knows that Jesus can tell him how to find, or what to do, to fill in whatever is missing.

Jesus' comments back to him, about who is good but God kind of sets the stage for understanding the Commandments, which are pretty straightforward: 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.

The man replies that he had kept all of these since his youth. And he probably has, in the strictest sense. He is probably a religious person who knew the system, who knew the expectations, and he was a good person. The old system was working for him. In those days, the thinking was that if you were good, if you obeyed all the commandments, God would bless you with material wealth. The logical flip side of that was that if you were wealthy, you must be a righteous person, but if you were poor, you obviously were guilty of some kind of serious un-confessed sin.

And then the next line, which by the way is found only in Mark's account of this meeting, tells us a great deal. "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.'" Jesus loved him. What Jesus directs the man to do is not a form of judgment or condemnation. Jesus knew the man, and his life, and loved him.

When I teach the Ten Commandments in Confirmation class or on retreats, I usually start by talking about God's purpose for the commandments. We tend to think of these rules as rules that were given to keep us from being bad. To some folks way of thinking, commandments keep us from having any fun. But we talk about how actually the Commandments are God's gift to us because God loves us and doesn't want to see us be hurt. When we disobey commandments, someone gets hurt, eventually we all get hurt.

It's kind of like the parent that tells a child don't touch the hot stove, or don't run into the street. Parents have those rules because they don't want their children to get burned fingers, or run over by a car.

Jesus loved the man, Jesus truly wanted this man to know life, the fullness of life, and the only way to get there would be to let go of the life that he had, the life the man already knew was missing something.

"When the man heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions" In Jesus' day there was no such thing as a middle class. In those days, when it came to money and possessions, there were pretty much just two groups, the haves and the have-nots. If you had land, and possessions, you had the ability to hang around with other people who had land and possessions, to make alliances with them, do business with them, and make more money and get more possessions.

If you didn't have land or many possessions, you pretty much worked every day for the folks who were the rich landowners to earn enough to get you by from day to day or week to week, you probably had a little house and enough to put food on the table most of the time. For this man to sell all his possessions and give them to the poor meant to switch places, to move from the haves to the have-nots. And he couldn't do it, even though he knew that something important was missing from his life, the life of abundant stuff, he couldn't let it all go in order to do something new.

So he goes away grieving. Not angry, but grieving. Maybe he knows down deep, that he is the one who will continue to miss out on something important, something profoundly life-giving because he can't let go of his possessions. It is not so much that he owns his stuff, as it is that his stuff owns him.

Now, I can never be too hard on this guy. I never want to be judgmental. Because I am pretty sure I am a lot like him. I don't think Jesus has ever asked me to sell all my possessions and give them to the poor. But if Jesus ever did, I doubt that I would be able to do it. Who of us could? If God came to you in a dream and said, "Sell everything you have and take it to the people of Sudan or Bangladesh or Chiapas, and go and live there with them and care for them," could you do it?

The rest of the passage, Jesus explores this problem a little more with his disciples. The problem that wealth and possessions pose to being a faithful follower of Jesus. Our possessions, our worldly treasures have a strong hold on us. They can even create a sort of captivity for us. There is a basic sort of way in which the only way to be freed from that captivity is to give our possessions away.

There is a basketball star by the name of David Robinson who probably has a contract for millions of dollars to play basketball. With such wealth, it would be easy to focus on your money, your possessions, and everything those possessions make possible. But this fellow uses some of his wealth to feed the homeless through his Feed My Sheep program. He helps needy families get diapers and baby food through a charity called The Ruth Project. Here's what he says about such giving: "These aren't sacrifices for me. If I'm clutching on to my money with both hands, how can I be free to hug my wife and kids?"

Just a little footnote about the strange image Jesus uses to talk about the difficulty the wealthy will have with letting go of the stuff that owns them. "It will be easier for a

camel to get through the eye of a needle, than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God.” There are several explanations of this metaphor in the various commentaries.

The one that I find the most convincing is the one that explains that the “eye of a needle: may have been referring to the little doors that were created in a city wall for people to go in and out. Every city had big front gates that were opened most of the time, and people could come and go. People on their horses or camels could ride in easily. But, if there was a threat from some invader, those gates could be closed. And if you needed to get in or out, a person could crouch down and go through one of these little gates. But soldiers on horses, or camels, couldn’t come through. You can’t come through if you try to hold on to your position of power and prestige. You can only enter the Kingdom of God if you come humbly, leaving the camel behind.

I don’t think many of us can give away everything we own. So what then should we do? Does that mean we go away grieving too? There’s no point in following Jesus if you can’t sell everything and move to a third world country? No, I don’t think that is how it works. I think we turn to the words from Amos and the letter to the Hebrews to help us find our way.

We turn to Amos for a word of guidance. Amos sums up what God wants us to do like this, “Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gates.” Give a care about suffering, whether it is other people’s suffering or your own. Let your heart be broken for all the ways people are hurting in the world. And love well-being, yours, and everybody else’s as well. Seek the good of all, rejoice when someone who has suffered is blessed with a home, or food and clothing, or a good job, or a chance at a better life.

And establish justice in the gates. That is to say, work for a just society. Justice here is not the justice of recompense, punishment for evil-doing, Rather is it the justice of people being treated fairly, of not being cheated, or being taken advantage of, of being paid a living wage, of having rights and being respected in a society. That’s the goal, that’s the thing to work for.

And we turn to Hebrews for a word of assurance. Because none of us are ever going to be able to follow perfectly. All of us are going to cling to our possessions more than we ought to. We are going to be more concerned about ourselves than about others. We are going to keep quiet or mind our own business when we ought to have spoken out for the justice for someone else. That’s when we need to remember that we are invited to approach the throne of grace with boldness. There we will receive mercy and forgiveness for our shortcomings, and we will find grace to go back out into our world and try again, to live the life God calls us to. Amen.