

Proper 23, Year B

October 11, 2015

Mark 10:17-31

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?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 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.'" He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." 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." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. 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!" 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! 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." They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." 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, 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. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

I was at home when the phone rang. I answered it, and a recorded voice immediately began speaking: "Did you know that every year in the United States, two million homes get broken into, with thieves getting away with your valuable possessions? We are currently offering a deal on a security system for your home. If you would allow us to put a sign in your front yard..." I hung up at that point, because I could tell what that recorded voice was doing: it was telling me that there was reason for me to be afraid – afraid in my own home. And that existential fear was directly related to the possibility of losing my possessions. Securing my life involved *protecting* my possessions, and this company had a system they could sell me which would do just that – protect my possessions, and thus remove my fear.

It's a perfect strategy, for it plays on our strongly-held human tendency to link our safety with the accumulation of possessions – a tendency which is particularly strong in the midst of our American consumer culture. Yet over and over again, as in today's Gospel, Jesus teaches us that this tendency to want to secure our lives by accumulating and guarding our possessions is spiritually misguided, and can inhibit our growth in God.

In today's Gospel lesson, a man approaches Jesus wanting, in effect, to secure his life, both now and in the future. "Good teacher," he says, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus responds with a statement that seems puzzling – especially to us Christians. “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” What Jesus is doing is hinting that if the man is seeking to inherit eternal life, he will have to focus on the goodness of God, not the goodness of a teaching – even the teaching of Jesus. (John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom: The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 246)

But Jesus realizes that the man isn’t there yet. The man is still tied into a consciousness of action and reward, so Jesus meets him at this level. “You know the commandments,” he says, and then Jesus lists some of them. The man replies that he has kept all these from his youth. “‘Youth’ is the operative word,” remarks Fr. John Shea. For “This is a young man’s spirituality, all eagerness, energy, and most of all, in contemporary terms, ego.” (*ibid.*)

It’s important to note that Jesus does not denigrate this seeker’s path. For the man has faithfully practiced what Richard Rohr, in his book “*Falling Upward*” calls a “first half of life spirituality.” In the first half of life, we appropriately concentrate on good actions, achieving, building a good moral foundation and a solid ego. Jesus affirms all this when, as our Gospel says, he “looks on the man and loves him.” But Jesus also discerns that the man has gone as far as he can in first-half of life spiritual growth; he is ready to advance in his spiritual journey to the next level. But this will require a very different attitude, energy, and consciousness than that which the man has engaged in up to this point in his life. Jesus calls this new level “treasure in heaven,” and it means a total re-orientation of the man’s life, away from the constant striving for moral perfection and ego building and into a life lived in God, a participation in the life of the Holy Trinity. This is what Jesus is inviting the man into when he looks at him in love and says, “Go, sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” Follow Jesus into a life lived in the Spirit of God.

My friends, in the face of the inevitable death of each and every one of us, our efforts to accumulate material goods are put in stark perspective. The strategy of accumulating in order to achieve security denies the reality of death, as Jesus teaches in his parable about the man who grows a bumper crop and instead of sharing it, builds bigger barns to hoard it – only to die that very night. (Luke 12:13-21) Temporal life, as temporal life, is radically insecure. The question is: How will we respond to that fact? As I mentioned at the start, a natural human tendency, strengthened by our consumer culture, is to respond to the insecurity of life on this planet by accumulating possessions, rather than trusting in God.

Fr. John Shea, in one of his books, writes: “If you bought this book, you own it. It might even be on a shelf with other books that you own. Perhaps the shelves are in a house that you own. Perhaps there is a car that you own... Even if you say the bank owns the house and car, **you** are paying them off in order to own them... We are all owners and have an owning spirit.” (*ibid.*, p. 249)

It’s true, is it not? We are all owners and have an owning spirit. This is the basic problem today’s Gospel story addresses, for an owning spirit is opposed to a Gospel spirit, opposed to “treasure in heaven”. If our lives are something we own, we will tend to grasp and protect them,

and we will be afraid of giving too much of ourselves away. A Gospel spirit of love and gratitude, on the other hand, sees life as something we receive each and every day as a gift, and it multiplies as we generously share it with others. A Gospel spirit knows that our lives belong to God.

“Children,” Jesus says, “how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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.” And let us be honest with ourselves: each and every one of us is rich. If you don’t believe that, consider this prayer by scholar William Boice:

“Dear Lord, I have been re-reading the [story] of the Rich Young Ruler [the man in our Gospel reading] and his obviously wrong choice. But it has set me thinking. No matter how much wealth he had, he could not ride in a car, have *any* surgery, turn on a light, buy penicillin, hear a pipe organ, watch TV, wash dishes in running water, ... sleep on an inner spring mattress, or talk on the phone... If *he* was rich, then what am *I*?” [*What Really Counts* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc., 2005), p. 303.]

Fr. Shea asks the question, “What is it that spiritual traditions in general – and Gospel spirituality in particular – have against owning material possessions?” He then answers his own question:

“Material possessions are the tip of the iceberg. The iceberg is the inner drive to own and accumulate. This drive, in turn, arises from a profound sense of insecurity... When we accumulate wealth and possessions, we relieve the basic anxiety that, in [this earthly life], we are under constant attack. When the barn is full, the wolf is not at the door. A sense of safety replaces fear. Storing up things in the present makes us feel that the future is protected. Of course, the larger the accumulation is, the greater the sense of safety.

“...When people accumulate wealth, they have to protect it. Therefore, most of their time and energy is spent in holding on to what they have accrued, for it is ownership that brings the sense of safety. ...[T]he need for feeling safe makes the idea of sharing with others ludicrous.” (*ibid.*, p. 249)

We have an owning spirit, especially in the midst of our American consumer culture, and the need for feeling safe makes the idea of sharing with others ludicrous. It is this fearful, grasping, hoarding attitude and mindset that Jesus identifies as the barrier the man must surmount in order to achieve the next level of spiritual growth – a second-half of life spirituality.

Jesus is not some kill-joy out to take our possessions away. He simply sees us accumulating possessions in a desire to protect ourselves from the fragile nature of this temporal life, with the result that we come to trust in our possessions rather than in God. It is not possessions in and of themselves that is the problem; it is our **relationship** to our possessions.

When Jesus tells the rich man to go, sell all he has and give it to the poor, and then come and follow him, he is not giving the man one more commandment to observe. Rather, he is drawing a picture, if you will, of life free *from* the hold that possessions so often have on us, and free *for* life in God and service of God’s people in this world. We need not take the instruction to sell all

our possessions literally, but we should take with utmost seriousness Jesus' message that freedom from bondage to our possessions is a necessary step to the next level of our growth in God. It is a difficult step, to be sure, which is why Jesus says in our Gospel, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!" – and why this is the only time in all the Gospels that Jesus ever invites someone to follow him and the person refuses. It is a difficult step, indeed; but *necessary* if we are to have treasure in heaven, life in God, who alone is good.

AMEN

(Much of this sermon is taken from John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom: The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005)