

Proper 23B 2021 Sermon

October 10, 2021

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 answered the phone, 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 salesman on the phone had a system he could sell me which would do just that – protect my possessions, thus making me feel safe.

It's a perfect marketing strategy, for it plays on our strongly-held tendency to link our safety, survival, and security with the accumulation of money or possessions – a tendency which is particularly strong in our American consumer culture.

Richard Rohr tells the story about a precocious 4-year-old girl. Her newborn baby brother had just been brought home from the hospital, and after her parents had gotten the infant settled in his crib in the nursery, the girl made an unusual request. “I want to talk to my new little brother alone,” she said. The parents put their ears to the nursery door and heard the little girl saying to her baby brother, “Quick, tell me who made you. Tell me where you came from. I’m beginning to forget!”¹

As newborns, we have not yet developed a sense of separateness from our mothers, the world, or God. All is One. But as we grow and develop, we, like that 4-year-old girl, begin to forget that Original

Oneness, and we develop a sense of self as *separate* from others and from the world. We learn the words, “It’s mine!”

Fr. Thomas Keating said that true happiness is the experience of God’s loving presence.² We were created in the image and likeness of God, and yet, like that 4-year-old girl, we have forgotten where we came from, forgotten our Original Oneness, forgotten that all-embracing sense of God’s loving, secure presence. And we have developed our own emotional programs for happiness, in an attempt to satisfy our felt needs for security and survival, power and control, affection and esteem. Having forgotten that it is **God** who brings *true* happiness, we begin looking outside ourselves for things that will satisfy our felt needs for security, control, and affection.³ And one of the most *common* programs for happiness, which we **think** will bring us security, is the accumulation of money and possessions. As John Shea puts it, “when the barn is full, the wolf is not at the door... Storing up *things* in the present makes us feel that the future is protected.”⁴

The rich man in our Gospel story comes *running* up to Jesus, and **kneels** before him. The man has an inchoate sense that what Jesus has to offer is the “more” that his spirit is yearning for; and yet, the path of following Jesus is unpredictable, unclear, uncertain, while the rich man’s *wealth* is something tangible and undeniable. Giving it up, as

Jesus asks him to do, would raise his insecurity to an intolerable degree; and so he turns down the offer to be a disciple of Jesus, and goes away grieving the loss of this opportunity to have his soul's thirst satisfied.

He is the only person in all the Gospels to whom Jesus issues the invitation "Follow me" and who refuses. And it's because of his over-attachment to the false security of his possessions.

Now, if you are at all like me, you can sympathize with this rich man in today's Gospel. Our future is uncertain. Will we have enough money if some unforeseen emergency happens? We might get cancer or a heart attack, and the medical costs would be exorbitant. What if we live to be 100 – would we have enough savings to continue living in a comfortable manner? And so, the only *prudent* thing to do is to save up enough money to meet our possible future needs.

And, my friends, this is not entirely wrong. We should do what we can to reasonably provide for our future. I don't think that Jesus is some kill-joy out to take our possessions away. He simply sees that, by accumulating possessions in a desire to protect ourselves from the fragile nature of this temporal life, we can easily come to trust in our possessions rather than in God. Each time we look at our money and

see the imprinted words, “In God we trust,” it is an opportunity for us to ask ourselves, “**Do** I, really? Do I trust in **God** for my security, my life, more than I trust in my money and possessions?”

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) As John Shea notes, “Temporal life, *as* temporal life, is radically insecure.”⁵ The question is: How will we *respond* to that fact – that any one of us could die tomorrow? Will we respond with fear, storing up treasures on earth, “where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal;” or do we store up for ourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal?” (Matt. 6:19-20, NRSV) Can we come to the acceptance that life in this world **is** uncertain, AND, at the same time, God’s love for us and God’s presence within and among us is the most certain thing there is?

In her address to Diocesan Convention yesterday, our Bishop, Kym Lucas, began with that passage in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians where he speaks about his “thorn in the flesh” – some affliction he suffered from, the nature of which we don’t know. “Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that [this thorn in the flesh] would

leave me,” Paul writes; “but [the Lord] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’” (2 Cor. 12:8-9)

Bishop Lucas then shared with us a thorn in her flesh: her oldest son’s autoimmune disorder. “The problem with autoimmune disorders,” the Bishop said, “is that we don’t really have a good narrative about how to talk about [them]. ‘Is it going to get better?’ We don’t know. ‘Are we going to find a cure?’ We don’t know. The nature of the illness is such that you could see my son today and think he is perfectly fine. But a month ago, he was in the hospital because his immune system was not strong enough to fight off whatever opportunistic infection happened to be around that day, and that day it happened to be salmonella. He couldn’t fight it off, so he was in the hospital hooked up to tubes, getting antibiotics and all the things he needed. My husband and I have been living with this roller coaster since our son was 4 years old. And there were many times we stood outside his hospital room sobbing, because we couldn’t fix it, we couldn’t change it. If there was anything in our power that we could do to **take** his suffering, we would take it!

“But what my son has taught me is how to live with uncertainty. He came to a place where, as he was being dismissed from the hospital, he would say, ‘Well, since I’m not dying today, I guess I better make

the most of it.’ He *leans into* this uncertainty, recognizing that God’s grace is sufficient.” He leans into this uncertainty, recognizing that God’s grace is sufficient.

Deep within the soul of the rich man there is a strong sense that this man Jesus **has** that which will satisfy his deepest longings, quench his greatest thirst. He eagerly *runs* up to Jesus and **kneels** before him, powerfully drawn to this man whom his unconscious Self **knows** has the key to eternal Life, the kingdom of God. “What must I do to inherit eternal Life?” he asks. It is his soul speaking. And Jesus, loving him, names the elephant in the room – that looming obstacle that is keeping him from abundant Life, Life in God: namely, his trust in the power of wealth to save him from insecurity and uncertainty. “Go, sell what you own,” Jesus tells him, “and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” In what, or in Whom, will the man trust? Transient, earthly wealth, subject to moth and rust and thieves? or the uncertain, unpredictable future of following this man who has the key to eternal life? Can he – can we – lean into the uncertain-but-abundant life of following Jesus, knowing that God’s grace is sufficient, God’s grace is enough?

AMEN

2 Thomas Keating, *The Human Condition: Contemplation and Transformation* (p. 9). Paulist Press. Kindle Edition.

3 Keating, *ibid.*, p. 13

4 John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom: The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 249

5 John Shea, *ibid.*, p. 250