

Christ Church + Washington Parish
The Rev. Cara Spaccarelli
October 14, 2018; Mark 10:17-31
Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost, Year B¹

There was once a trusting abbot who was taken aback by the spiritual passion of a young monk. The monk begged the abbot to let him live even more simply than the monks in the monastery - in a lean-to down by the river. The abbot eventually gave in, and the young monk set up his lean-to. Each night he would wash his one robe and put it out to dry. One morning he was dismayed to find that the rats had torn his robe to shreds. He begged for another from a nearby village, only to have the rats destroy that one as well. He got a cat to keep the rat away, but he found he had to beg for milk for the cat. To get around that, he got a cow; but of course that meant he had to have hay. He got the hay from the fields around his hut. He had to get workers to help. To pay the workers he had to acquire more land. And so on. Several years later he was one of the wealthiest men in the region when the abbot came back through and found him near his large home. He asked the monk what was the meaning of all this? "Oh Holy Abbot, there was no other way to keep my robes from being torn up." The more we are wrapped up in what we have, whatever it is, the easier it is to ignore who God is calling us to be.²

The young man who Jesus encounters in the gospel today is wrapped up in himself. Notice what his desire is for – eternal life. He wants to know that he will live forever. He wants to know that he has done it all right. He is sincere. He is eager, but he is really focused on himself. Jesus' response to his question – What must I do to inherit eternal life? - one of the few direct responses

¹ *Disclaimer: I do not read my sermons so actual wording of sermon may be different when preached. Lots of grace would be appreciated for grammatical errors as I both write for the ear and spend time on delivery rather than doing a thorough editing.*

² Illustration from http://day1.org/4207-sticker_shock_for_the_soul

he ever gives to a question. Follow the commandments. The man is relieved; he's followed all of them. But Jesus can see that he doesn't get it. Maybe he's followed them technically but not in spirit. Because the spirit of the commandments is all about relationship. It is about tending to your relationship with God and with the people in your community, and if this man was doing that, he wouldn't be at Jesus' feet right now obsessed about whether he had earned eternal life for himself. It just wouldn't amount to a chief concern. Jesus could see that there was a stumbling block in his way.

His money. Now we know money can do wonderful things in the world, but we also know money, an abundance of or a lack of or a desire for more, can gnaw at the soul. The danger of wealth, or a pursuit of it, can lure one to the illusion of utter self-sufficiency. Wealth can convince us that our decisions are justified or are worthy based solely on our own self-validation. My money is mine. I worked hard for it. I deserve this indulgence. It's for my family, which is not necessarily a less selfish justification. We want this. We need this. Wealth's power turned towards the self for the sake of self.

Jesus' response to the rich man, "you lack one thing" is better translated "you are lacking in one thing." What he lacks, therefore, is not *something* but his lacking is a state of being – the way he is in the world is the problem. Four important verbs surround Jesus' response that give clues to the ways the rich man is deficient. Jesus "looked" at him and "loved" him. Jesus asks the rich man to "come" and then to "follow."

Where the rich man has come up short is in the actions of looking and loving, of coming and following -- all of which ask for attentiveness that turns toward the other. That demand looking beyond one's self. That insist the answer to the truest treasure is not in what you can amass for yourself but in how you connect to the people in your midst. To look at them. To love them. To come and follow this good teacher of God. Jesus doesn't say, "sell all of your possessions," but "sell what you own and give the money to the poor." A mandate to look outside of himself. A command to imagine that life's worth can never be met by the self alone.

This is not just a lesson that wealth is inherently bad and that you should give more money to the poor. It is, rather, an insistence that wealth without a commitment to connection will pull you away from the relationship that Jesus wants for you. That wealth without seeing the other, among other things, leads to narcissism. Wealth without loving the other exposes the absence of empathy. Wealth without the risk of answering an invitation to join something outside of yourself leaves you alone holding only that which has no worth in the kingdom of God.³

The rich man walked away alone holding only that which has no worth in the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God that he thought he wanted. His desire for eternal life was no match for the things he held most tightly to. Jesus showed him the truth. His real priorities, and he walked away in shame or sadness or a mixture of both.

³ The discussion of verbs and wealth comes from Katherine Lewis' reflection <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5232>

I see few seekers of eternal life these days. That's not why people come to church or seek out a deeper experience of God. I'm more likely to hear spoken explicitly or between the lines a desire for peace. A desire to experience a oneness with God, humanity, creation. A reminder that this, this moment is not all there is. A desire to align one's life with one's values. A desire to be moved. What hasn't changed though is that wealth is still a stumbling block. Wealth in all its forms, really.

An abundance of work has distracted us from spending time in community, turning attention to relationships that aren't transactional in origin. An abundance of entertainment opportunities has distracted us from spending time in substantive conversation with other people and God, making the self-awareness that comes in conversation and prayer elusive, and the peace that comes as one matures through that awareness even more elusive. An abundance of money has meant that our spending values are in constant tension in lining up with our spoken values. In the U.S., a culture that tends to think of itself as generous, the more you make the less percentage you give away. People who make \$25,000 or less a year, give away 12% of their income, between 25k and 50k, almost 7%, between 50k and 75k, almost 5%, it keeps going down until it hits 2.6% for those making 200k to 500k and then there at the half-million mark people start giving more again climbing up to 5.6% for those making over 2 million a year.⁴ A wealth of money, entertainment, work, does not make us more secure and stable and therefore looking to care for others, but more self-absorbed. To resist this pull, there must be a strong commitment to connection with God and one another.

⁴ Based on data from itemized tax returns, <https://www.fool.com/retirement/2016/11/27/the-average-americans-charitable-donations-how-do.aspx>

It is a tall task to stay vigilant to that attentiveness. It requires honest gut checks when looking at your time and your budget: How do I use time and money to serve myself? How do I use time and money to serve God and others? Which of the things I use them for line up with the values I hold? It requires listening to the truth God speaks to your heart, and the truth can be hard to digest and easy to walk away from. But I do have some good news here, two pieces in fact, from this gospel.

A pastor led a Bible study in a college dorm on this text, and he asked the gathered students, "What do you make of this story?"

"Had Jesus ever met this man before?" asked one of the students.

"Why do you ask?" the pastor responded

"Because Jesus seems to have lots of faith in him. He demands something risky, radical of him. In my experience, a professor only demands from students what the professor thinks the student can do."⁵

The good news is that Jesus wouldn't ask us to turn our wealth outwards if he didn't think we could do it or perhaps that it was worth doing even if we struggle with it for the rest of our lives. Jesus reminds us that the we are not alone in the struggle a few verses later, "with God, all things are possible."

⁵ Edited from a story Will Willimon tells in his sermon found here: http://day1.org/1473-the_peril_and_the_promise_of_being_met_by_jesus