

It *IS* About the Money

Mark 10:17-31

So what do you think? Was the Lord just having him on? Do you think maybe Jesus just decided to have some fun with the rich man who blocked his way, dropped on his knees before him, then politely addressed him as “Good Teacher?” (And, by the way, in the Gospels, Matthew says this man was young, Luke says he was a ruler, but all three agree that he was *rich*.)

And at any rate, all three Gospels tell pretty much the same story; and it may sound to some as though Jesus was giving the rich man a hard time: he shows up, kneels down, and asks, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus tells him first of all that no one is good but God alone; then lures him into a conversation about the standards of conduct apropos to God’s Kingdom. There’s that check-list of the commandments (or at least the second tablet of the Top Ten).

The fellow says that he has done all that, man and boy. Whereupon, Mark says, Jesus *loved* him... and somehow we must suppose that he expressed that love by giving the man some fairly explicit directions about the road to eternal life.

If you weren’t paying attention, listen again: five imperative verbs in this encounter: Go! Sell! Give! Come! Follow!

Five commands, if you wish, interrupted by a promise:

- 1) Go
- 2) Sell what you have
- 3) Give to the poor

Then the promise: and you will have treasure in heaven; whence...

- 4) Come
- 5) Follow me.

And, the story SAYS, the man—the rich man—went away “sorrowful” because he was very wealthy.

So again: Do you think maybe Jesus was just toying with him; didn’t like the “cut of his jib,” perhaps, or wondered if he was being sincere, or needed to be taken to school as to the relative value of the values of this life?

May be; but go back. Mark says that Jesus *loved* him, but that’s the way it turned out.

II.

You have probably heard this more than once, but “all work and no *plagiarism* makes John a dull preacher” and, confession being good for the soul, let me say up front that I borrowed the title for this sermon from a fine editorial by Jill Duffield in a recent issue of the *Presbyterian Outlook*. Jill (by the way, an alumna of our Union Presbyterian Seminary extension in Charlotte) reminds us that, all said and done, discipleship *IS* about the money.

This time of year—stewardship season—she says, we are always careful to hedge our bets. We turn to a noble *trifecta*: time, talents and treasure; and we tend to use the first two members of that trinity to soften the impact of the third.

And maybe that’s not altogether a mistake. Discipleship clearly does involve the investment of our time and the employment of our talents for the sake of the Kingdom. Point taken; well taken. But let us never be misled: God has a primary claim on our *treasure* as well. It *IS* about the money! And it appears that Jesus was pretty clear when it came to that. When this rich/rich/rich young (maybe) ruler (maybe) inquired about the cost of discipleship, Jesus clearly said that it *is* about the money.

And there you have it; better, *here* we have it today, in this hour, in this place, at this table. It *is* about the money. And small wonder that Christian congregations—from the Book of Acts on—have struggled with the task of talking about money. I saw a column in a recent issue of *Presbyterian Heritage* entitled “Commerce and Communion,” which is a study of Presbyterian stewardship, the do’s and don’ts—and the *whoever-thought-of-that’s?*—over the years. Apparently, at various times, congregations have tried all kinds of fund-raising schemes, such as staged operettas, ice-cream ‘sociables,’ slave-camp meeting sing-alongs (Please don’t try that at home!); then ‘xylophone’ solos, maple-sugar festivals, and (here’s the topper!): bachelorette auctions in which “a group of young gentlemen go through the form of selling at auction a young lady to the highest bidder” (Don’t think I’d recommend trying that one, either!).

Now where was the session—or any sane person, for that matter—when someone came up with such ideas? There are bound to be better ways!

But asking for money in the church is always a sensitive issue. In another congregation in which I was involved I was an inadvertent witness to an episode in which a church-member came into the pastor’s office, and the pastor said, “Jack (not the real name), I’ve been looking over the pledge cards, and if this is the best you can do, then you probably need it worse than we do.” And with that he flipped the card across the desk to Jack.

A real shocker, but one with a happy ending: Jack said, “Well, maybe Sally and I need to give this some more thought.” And they did; and next year Jack was in charge of the Stewardship Campaign, and told that story on himself... and how the encounter had changed his life.

Obviously, it doesn’t always work that way. But it has to work *some way*, doesn’t it? It has to work *some way* for the sake of others, for the sake of the Church; it has to work that way for sake of our own souls!

III.

The man who came to Jesus “went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.” He got exactly the answer he *didn't* want with respect to the matter of eternal life; so his quest went unfulfilled. Or so it says.

But surely you noticed: Jesus did not leave the matter at that. The remainder of our lesson for today informs us that Jesus went on to give his disciples a few thoughts—troubling thoughts—concerning the relationship between wealth and the Kingdom of God; and it is evident that the acquisition of the one does not equate to membership in the other.

And all the talk about the needle's eye being a city gate that only camels who kneel can come through is just as much baloney today as it was when somebody thought it up along about the 9th century. What Jesus is clearly saying that it is hard, *hard, hard* to correlate what you have with what you believe. And when the disciples say, “That's just impossible!” Jesus tells them that all things are possible with God. Then when Peter downright whines, “Look, Lord, we've done just about all we can do!”, Jesus says that those who give up the valuables of this world will receive one hundred-fold in God's Kingdom.

So it sounds like it *is* about the money. And what do you think about that part? Was Jesus just baiting the disciples? Was he just winding them up with some impossible possibility—or possible impossibility—to the point that Peter blurts out what all the rest of them have been thinking: “ We've done the very best we can, and now you make it sound like it's not good enough.”

Still Jesus doesn't let them off the hook; indeed he turns instead to that all-purpose mantra of his, which tells us more about access to the Kingdom in fewer words than anything I know of in the Gospel:

“Many that are first will be last, and the last first.”

And that, for what it's worth, is that.

IV.

So what do you reckon we can find to help us out at the crux of this dilemma regarding what we do with what we have? Seems like our human nature is locked in combat with itself: on the one hand, our natural instinct to acquire, to retain, to preserve, to enlarge our stockpile of this world's good things; on the other, a Biblical injunction, Old Testament and New, early and late and very, very often, to share what we have... maybe even give it all away.

Hard to even think about *giving it all away*, isn't it? I have a dear young friend who has made the considered decision in the midst of a very satisfying career to take Holy Orders in the Catholic Church. Needless to say, this is no snap judgment nor does it have any whiff of escapism about it. *It is a call*. In watching her days of preparation for entry into the convent, I was a bit overwhelmed with the very idea that she must systematically divest herself of virtually everything she owns: home, car, clothing, furniture, pots and pans and most personal possessions. Everything. And not sell it for a profit, but give it all away; or if she sells any of it, give any proceeds away as well.

Not that is really hard for me to comprehend. But then the thought occurs to me that my friend has found her own explicit answer to the question of what you do with what you have. She has a particular calling, and she is responding faithfully to that call. She is doing what she believes God calls her to do.

In his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, Lamar Williamson comments in passing that the rich man who comes to Jesus seeking eternal life is the only person in that Gospel who actually declines a direct and personal call to discipleship: Go! Sell! Give! Come! Follow! It was obviously and unmistakably a call to him, a *personal* call to him, “and he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.”

Well, point taken that Richie Rich is the only one to whom Jesus says, “Sell all you have,” and it stands to reason that few of us (Presbyterians, at least)—no one in this room today, so far as I know—is called to the Benedictine vow of absolute poverty.

But it equally stands to reason that *each one of us here* who alleges to be a disciple of Jesus Christ does have a particular point of encounter with our Lord with respect to our material resources. And Jesus had a variety of ways of saying, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. So the crucial question of Christian stewardship is simply this: When I say “I believe,” what portion of what I possess is Christ calling me to give to someone else?”

Let me suggest a simple exercise, a thought-game, if you will. Picture in your mind’s eye that page in your 2014 Income Tax Return that has to do with charitable contributions: so much for this good cause, so much for that one (including so much for DCPC, I hope and pray) Got it? Now: lay alongside that page two or three of your recent monthly statements from Visa or MasterCard (or any other plastic of choice). Any month will do, but let’s just say the month or months in which you were on vacation.

Make a comparison. Any first impressions? Did you spend more on eating out, or buying clothes, or leisure activities than you seem to have serving God or helping others? Based on your sample, what have you been doing with what you’ve got? Had *you* been that rich, maybe-young, maybe-ruler who asked Jesus the question of eternal life, would you be willing to show him those two documents as mitigating evidence for your case?

More to the point: would you be willing to attach those documents to the pledge card you are about to place on this table, placing your treasure alongside your time and talents in supporting this congregation, its ministry and its mission? Try not to let yourself off the hook in searching for an answer to that question.

And do not lay aside God’s call to discipleship in sorrow because of all the *stuff* you want, or already have and want to keep.

V.

That's enough! So let me finish this off on a somewhat brighter note.

A couple of summers ago, one of the preachers at Montreat told the story of a congregation in Southern Africa which always considers the offering to be the high point of Sunday worship. With the background of music and native drums, first the children, then the women, then the men dance down the aisle and place their offerings on the table.

While everyone continues to dance, the deacons count the money. Then, if not enough has been raised, they simply go through the routine again: first children, then women, then men; and they do so over and over, as many times as necessary until the necessary amount has been raised. So you have to give until you get tired of dancing!

Happy thought!

Now the appropriate next line might be: ***Don't make me have to ask Jane Cain to bring out the drums!***

May God consecrate all that we do this day in Jesus's name.

John W. Kuykendall

Davidson College Presbyterian Church

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