

The Season of Pentecost, Proper 23
Stewardship blog
October 10, 2021
Mark 10: 17 – 31
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Grace and peace to you from the One who was, who is, and who is to come. Amen.

In so many faith communities, it is the season for raising money, and I suspect you are also beginning to hear from many causes, most worthy, who ramp up their asks as well through the weeks preceding the end of our personal fiscal years. Of course, we all know it takes money to make ministry happen, whether it happens under the auspices of a church or the mission of a non-profit. And we know that we are the source, via offering or donation, of the resources that will contribute to those coffers.

This is the funding dance. We know the rules and we play by them. If the non-profit is efficient and resourceful, if we are inspired by its impact, then we may be generous within our means to encourage more good work to make some small corner of the world a better place. If we are connected to our faith communities, if we are spiritually fed and believe in the ministries we tackle, if we know ourselves to be useful to and appreciated by each other, if we can see the difference being made for our many neighbors, then we will give to support the work that supports us and others.

This is the fund-raising side of stewardship, necessary and good. However, our texts today call us deeper than the swipe of a credit card, or the writing of a check at a gala, or the setting up of a sustaining gift to help your congregation get through the lean summer months. Our texts, as Hebrews pointedly says, reminds us that we stand naked before our creator, who can see everything in all its interconnectedness and hidden consequence.

This is not a comfortable metaphor. Stay with it rather than race for cover. Be patient.

Also not comfortable is Mark's story of the rich man who came to Jesus to learn how to ramp up his righteousness in a quest for eternal life. In his world, it was common to believe that material wealth was a sure sign of divine favor. The opposite was also true—that those who struggled were actually reaping the consequences of some familial sin, poor choices, or a lack of aspiration. Being rich, this man at Jesus' feet was already perceived as one who must be more righteous than most, given his material "blessing."

Jesus responded with a list of the of commandments that highlight the ways we are to treat our neighbors: do not murder; do not commit adultery; do not bear false witness; do not defraud; honor your parents. The man offered that these commands he had been keeping from his youth.

Then, the text says, “Jesus, looking at him, loved him.” Pause there. Jesus looked at him with love because he loved him. And Jesus said, “You lack one thing.” Just one. Jesus could see his commitment to following the law, to being a good neighbor.

And then, this: “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor...” I can imagine the man’s brain stopped right here, though Jesus went on.

Let’s spend a minute with this man, who came so honestly to Jesus to become a better person of faith. He knew the rules and he had played by them. But in this exchange, Jesus throws out the rule book and asks the impossible. His defenses up, the man was shocked and went away grieving. He had many possessions.

Can we understand? I can, especially for those of us who have found some degree of financial security. If we are particularly righteous, we ask ourselves regularly how much is enough because we know there is a world filled with people for whom enough is elusive if not unachievable. If we are compassionate types, we give to good causes and seek to be as generous as we can. We don’t want to be wards of the state. We don’t want our kids to be on the hook for our long-term care. We want to contribute to the consumer spending that keeps our economy humming most of the time.

And we want to be seen as contributors, as justice-seekers and generous givers. But I see something else in my heart-of-hearts, and perhaps you do, too. I see one for whom my image and reputation as a generous, open-hearted, and committed-to-a-better-world kind of person is really important. Can I, can we, turn our eyes away from how we are perceived by ourselves and others toward how God, who knows all and sees all, might see us?

Can we acknowledge the complexity of the economic system within which we live? Can we see the web of wealth building that has been erected on the backs of so many? Some may have been your forebears, certainly, yet there are so many backs still at work today, all propping up our economic system. We’ve learned in these COVID months. Essential workers are indeed essential, and they are, on the whole, scantily rewarded for their work and often abused. Their risks, their contributions, their struggles? Like the culture of the rich man who came to Jesus, we too readily ignore the systemic causes of their poverty.

Similarly, we too readily ignore the systemic roots of our security. Job found this out. In his lament immediately following our text for today, having newly found himself at the bottom of the socio-economic pile instead of at the top, he could see how the poor were being starved of sufficient wealth, not just for today, but for the future, because it was happening to him. Read chapter 24. It is chillingly familiar.

And we need only tend to the news of weather and natural disasters to know that we have also asked the creation to pay more than its share for our wealth. It is pushing back now, determined to re-establish the equilibrium we continue to exploit to our peril.

If our eyes are open, we can see all of this. Our deeply human tendency to conflate luck with merit, to count ourselves “blessed,” to see ourselves as deserving, these things too often numb us to the suffering of our neighbors and cause us to see our giving as generosity rather than as a debt owed as compensation for the unequal economic system that sustains us, but not all.

Perhaps we, too, shocked at our nakedness, like the rich man in our text, turn away, grieving. Not much good news here. Jesus tells his disciples that it is easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the realm of heaven. Quite the metaphor, given our persistent human tendency to think the opposite.

How shall we position ourselves then? Throw up our arms and slink away? Double down on our defenses and cling to the idea that the poor are lazy or bear some other kind of flaw that perpetuates their misfortune? Flog ourselves into hopelessness?

Or see ourselves in our nakedness, as God does? Be in our vulnerability and ask for guidance and humbly seek another way? Remember the gift of bread and wine, the meal that confirms yet again, that God’s love for us is not in jeopardy, in spite of all this? Note the look in Jesus’ eye: “And Jesus looking at him, loved him.” Hear his words: For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

From Hebrews we learn of Jesus, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses...Let us, therefore, approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

We are invited to a better way, a path of mutual benefit and genuine relationship. We do not seek this way alone. In Jesus, we are freed from striving and gifted for service. With this promise as our foundation, we dare to aspire to joy and peace. God knows our vulnerabilities and welcomes us to the table of life.

Take a seat, then. God’s banquet is served for you, for me, and for all. Amen.