

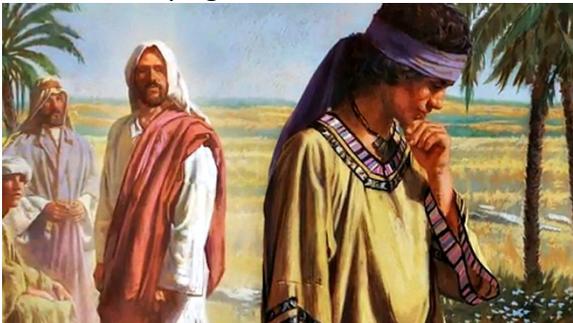
28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Cycle B, 10.14.18

Wisdom 7:7-11/Hebrews 4:12-13/Mark 10:17-30

YOU ARE LACKING ONE THING... FIND OUT WHAT IT IS AND GO FOR IT!

If you find this gospel passage difficult to swallow, you shouldn't be surprised. Look at the disciples' response when Jesus tells them how hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God. We're told they were "amazed" at his words and a few lines later, they act dumbfounded: *Well, then who can be saved?* The Jewish faith to which Jesus and his disciples adhered blessed wealth. It was seen as a sign of being favored by God. Why would they want to relinquish that blessing? The whole posture that Jesus takes seems absurd, impossible to follow. So believers have looked for ways to dumb it down and soften the demands. Christians have been trying to do that for centuries.



In one bible translation, an ancient scribe added words to make verse 24 read "how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God," as if the problem highlighted by the rich man is not being rich but putting faith in the wealth a person has or craves. Another interpreter centuries ago made up the idea of a low, narrow gate into Jerusalem called "the eye of the needle," through which camels could pass only if stooped and all their possessions taken off. Presumably, then, Jesus criticizes only the proud rich, or only

the rich who are not extremely determined to enter the kingdom. Unfortunately, no such gate ever existed, and Jesus' words didn't make such distinctions about wealthy people's attitudes.

Other preachers have told us that Jesus has some insight that wealth was this particular man's special "weak spot," and so he zeroed in on it only to expose the man's distinctive shortcoming. This gives us permission to assume that Jesus would not ask us to part with our possessions, just those things that we really don't want to give up—maybe talking on the cell phone while driving or eating too much fried food, for example. Other preachers assert that Jesus was only testing the man but he wasn't really serious. But such an interpretation makes a mockery of Jesus' love for the man and the man's grief as he walked away sad. If Jesus isn't serious, why doesn't he chase after the crestfallen man, saying, "*Wait! Here comes the good part! Let me show you grace now!*"? Jesus' explanation is rather clear: just as large animals simply do not fit through tiny openings, so the wealthy do not fit in the kingdom of God. Even a rich person who has kept all the commandments governing social responsibilities, as this devout man has, cannot fit.

What can we say about Jesus' command that makes sense to us in light of this shocking invitation that Jesus offers? Well, for one thing, this is the only time in Mark's gospel that Jesus makes such a demand about renouncing possessions. We know from other parables, like the sower and the seed, that there are a lot of things besides wealth and its deceptions that can choke the Word of God and prevent the seed of grace from growing. Laziness can do that. Using other people for your own advancement; being arrogant, dishonest or

apathetic. There are so many things that can keep us away from God. Being rich is not the unforgiveable sin. The primary call that Jesus' makes is not a call to poverty, but to discipleship. He tells the man to sell what he has and then to *come and follow him*.

Secondly, Jesus doesn't tell the man merely to separate himself from his possessions, or to burn them or walk away from them. Jesus goes a step further. He tells him to sell what he has and give to the poor. The man is invited not only to change his relationship to his money, but to change his relationship to the poor. He's asked to help them and to identify with them. Maybe that's why the man walks away. It's not just his wealth he'd have to relinquish but his status and power as well. Jesus' command to follow him has financial, social and political costs for all of us.

So money and wealth do have a lot to do with becoming a hindrance to our faithful following of Christ, but there's something more that this gospel passage is about. Do you recall the movie "City Slickers"? Mitch, played by Billy Crystal, is a city boy. He and two of his friends are facing their 40th birthdays and experiencing midlife crises. They decide they need time away from their "soft" city lives and so they make plans to vacation at a dude ranch, where they will be responsible for a two-week-long cattle drive through the Colorado hills. They're on a journey of self-discovery, like the man in today's gospel who approaches Jesus. Along the way these urban cowboys encounter bad weather; macho, gun-wielding ranchers; and pregnant cattle. Curly, their guide, is a crusty old cowboy.



Curly asks Mitch, "Do you know what the secret of life is?" Curly holds up one finger and continues, "One thing. Just one thing." When Mitch presses him for the secret, Curly says, "That's what you have to find out." The answer unfolds subtly in the film, although it's never stated explicitly. Mitch and his friends eventually finish the cattle drive with their lives back on track, but their lives had to be turned around before they reached their goal.



Our friend in the gospel asks Jesus a similar question: *What must I do to inherit eternal life? What the one thing that's the secret of life? the one thing that will bring me happiness?* Jesus invites the man to step across a threshold. He casts a gaze of love on the man that calls him to abandon everything else. Total self-surrender to God is the one thing that can bring abundant life. There's no getting around it. In the past couple years, some of our ingrained assumptions about financial security have been uprooted. The fickle stock market report is no longer an indicator of steady growth. Our runaway consumption has

proven to be a liability. We're coming to the realization that money is the most overrated commodity on today's market of values. It can buy a house, but it can't make a home. It can pay for medicine, but it can't purchase health. It can acquire things, but things don't satisfy the soul. Perhaps our ears are more open and our hearts more receptive to the truth that God alone can fulfill our deepest desires and yearnings. Surrendering our lives to God and following Christ wholeheartedly is never easy. When we take that risk, however, and accept the daily demands of discipleship, we are choosing the path of wisdom and receive from God an abundance of blessings in this life and in the age to come.



We still have to own things, accumulate wealth, plan for the future (and raise the funds for our new Community Center!) If we didn't we would be irresponsible. But we can do it in a way that

doesn't delude us into thinking that our security lies in our bank account. We can be more generous to others because we're not intent on hoarding more than we can realistically use. Unlike the wealthy man in the gospel, we don't have to walk away sad. We can walk towards Christ with a spring in our step and a lightness of being in our hearts because we are free. Someone suggested there are two ways to be rich. One is in the abundance of your possessions. The other is in the fewness of your wants. When we depend on Christ to supply us with our daily needs, our wants become few indeed. We become children again – simple, happy and free.



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