



Sunday October 10, 2021

Pastor Tony Acompnado

Mark 10:17-31 (Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost)

I like knowing things. And I like knowing things ahead of time. I like knowing things about the people I'm going to meet with. I like knowing all kinds of details about the places I'm traveling to. And I like knowing what my menu options are when I go out to eat. I like knowing things because when I know something I feel like I'm better prepared to engage in deeper conversations, or so I don't waste time wandering or get lost, or so I won't feel pressured into choosing something to eat that I won't be completely satisfied with. But if I'm being honest, the truth is, I like knowing things because it makes me feel like I'm in control.

In today's Gospel from Mark, we encounter a rich young man who comes before Jesus with a straightforward and important question I think all of us would like to know the answer to. "*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*"

As a pastor this seems like a dream question. When someone comes to you hungry and ready. So, when I first read this story I thought, "*Oh, this one's gonna be easy.*" Except, if you know *anything* about Jesus then you know this isn't going to be the case. Jesus could've offered a warm welcome to this enthusiastic rich man who comes to him. "*What's that, you say you've already followed the commandments for years...that's fantastic! And wow, you must already know who I am because of how you've come to me with your question.*" I think Jesus could've eased the man into the values of God's kingdom with something simple like, "*How about you just write a small check to charity this year? Nothing scary. Nothing over the top. Nothing that would break the bank.*"

But no. Jesus shows little interest in making this man comfortable with his response. In fact, he takes a completely different approach. Today's message from Jesus is a tough one, because it's essentially a put up or shut up challenge from Jesus to get our priorities straight. So, when Jesus does respond...I'm not sure I like what I hear. Listening to Jesus makes me feel uncomfortable and a bit restless. Maybe it doesn't feel good because in essence it's a complete reversal of the prevailing view of worldly success. And Jesus is telling people that wealth is not a blessing.

And yet, there's something in this text that reminds us why Jesus takes this somewhat harsh line with the man. The text says, "*Jesus looking at him, loved him.*" And because Jesus loved him, he said the truthful thing, the hard, unpalatable truth. Not the half-truth or the watered-down truth – just the truth. Jesus says, sell what you own, give it to the poor, and follow me.

But Jesus doesn't do this to upset the man, he does it because he loves him – and love that leads us down the right road redirects – it corrects, it halts. It doesn't let us do whatever we want and still call ourselves followers. It doesn't tell us the pleasing lie that we're just fine as we are. God's provocative love holds a mirror to our delusions, our broken priorities, and our half-hearted commitments. God's love shows us what we really are, not to shame or defeat us, but to deliver us.

I don't know about all of you, but this wasn't what I was expecting or hoping for when I wanted to know the answer to the rich man's question. On the one hand, this story raises questions about our attitude and approach toward wealth if we want to follow Jesus and inherit eternal life. On the other hand, it raises questions about our attitude and approach toward the grace God offers us with eternal life itself.

The rich man's question is also our question, "*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*" I can't help but wonder what would grieve and shock me in such a devastating way if Jesus asked me to surrender it for the sake of my spiritual growth and well-being. What do *you* consider so untouchable? What are *you* unwilling to consider as a potential obstacle in your relationship with God? What thing are *you* holding onto that's so "valuable" you couldn't possibly let it go? Is it an unhealthy habit, desire, or relationship you've become so attached to that it seems impossible to let go of? What is the one thing that might cause you to run away if God points it out to you and says, "let it go."

In walking away, the rich man in Mark's Gospel chooses a different path. Jesus answers his question, "*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*" with an offer of companionship – of friendship – of shared life. Jesus says, "Follow me." But that's not an answer the man can bear. The problem is not the man's wealth per se, but



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his attitude towards it. Accumulating riches tempts us to trust in our possessions and our powers of acquiring them, rather than in God for our ultimate security and comfort. But the rich man isn't ready, and he opts instead for fear, control, and independence.

Taking a faithful step into the future can be a difficult task – going to a new school, attending the first AA meeting, calling a marriage counselor, undergoing experimental treatment for a life-threatening illness, getting your child baptized and beginning a life of faith...or selling all we have and giving it to the poor to fully follow Jesus.

Reading today's Gospel reminded me about a beautiful prayer by American monk and theologian Thomas Merton. I fell in love with it as a teenager and I have come back to again and again ever since. It goes like this:

*My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore, I will trust you always
though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.*

I love this prayer for so many reasons, but mostly because of the way it voices a truth about the struggle of life and faith that I have identified and struggled with throughout my life.

I wish I could say that I fully identify with the person in this prayer – one who follows faithfully and without question. But too often I find myself being like the rich young man in Mark's Gospel – preferring to admire Jesus from a safe distance and living as I've always lived.

The road of discipleship – of following Jesus is hard – really hard. It asks difficult things of us...seemingly impossible things. It requires us to relinquish control...and I don't know about you, but doing that is scary, uncertain, and uncomfortable. Fortunately for us, God doesn't call us to "do" things to buy our way into heaven. We can't good-work our way into heaven. We can't even pray our way into heaven. Eternal life is a gift from God.

My friends, we can hear the difficult words of Jesus this day and not be afraid. Unlike the rich man in today's Gospel, we don't need to be discouraged by what we hear and run away. Because the cross of Christ reminds us of who Jesus is and how Jesus loves – with the truest and deepest love of God. Jesus lets the man – and *us* go, because that's the terrible and beautiful requirement of love. Love lets go. Love bides its time. Love hopes in absence. But all the while, love dreams of return, because even when things seem impossible to us...for God, all things are possible. Thanks be to God. Amen.