

“What Must I Do?”

Mark 10:17-31

October 11, 2009 – Proper 23B

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

[Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church](#)

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¹⁷As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁸Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” ²⁰He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” ²¹Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” ²²When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” ²⁴And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” ²⁶They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

²⁸Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” ²⁹Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, ³⁰who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. ³¹But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

Prayer.

What does it take to become rich?

This question may lead you to think,

“Pastor, if we knew the answer to that question,

we wouldn’t have to have a turkey dinner,

the parking lot would be full of luxury cars,

and I’d be attending church this morning in the Caribbean.”

What does it take to become rich?

If you’ve followed the D&C the past few weeks,

You are aware of the latest evangelical spin to hit our region,

Booming churches and charismatic preachers who teach

A gospel of abundance,

That wealth is good,

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And a sign of God's blessing.
Oh, they're booming alright;
Doesn't everyone want to become rich?
They probably are not using our gospel lesson for their service this morning.

What does it take to become rich?
I've observed in my life that rich is in the eye of the beholder.
It depends on the comparison between our own financial status and that of another.
To someone farming rocks in Afghanistan, you and I appear to be rich.
To us eking out a living,
working multiple jobs,
trying to keep food on the table for our family in West Walworth,
We might think of people like Tom Galisano, Donald Trump and Warren Buffett as rich.

What does it take to become rich?
A truly modest and humble approach to this question
Deflects the focus away from money and makes the question more obtuse:
"Oh, we may not be rich in money.
But our family is rich in love."
Let's acknowledge the quiet voice of our knowing conscience speaking deep inside,
"I dearly hope this is what Jesus meant in talking to the rich, young ruler,
because if he was talking about money,
I might have to part with some of mine!"

Let's face it:
Our gospel lesson for this morning gives each of us a queasy feeling of uncertainty.
If the righteous man couldn't pass the test,
And even though Jesus loved him
he lets him just up and walk away,
I'm not feeling too good about my own salvation.
That solid rock I've been standing on all my life
Is starting to feel like sinking sand.
The urge is nearly irresistible for both the clergy and the congregation:
Soften this passage and move on.
We'll both feel better about it in the morning.
Or will we?

Others have watered down our gospel:¹
Early church scribes made a tiny, tiny editorial change

¹ I am indebted to the original thought and excellent scholarship of Matt Skinner, Associate Professor of New Testament, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, as found at:
<http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?tab=4>

Hoping no one would catch on:

They added words to make 10:24 read

“how hard it is **for those who trust in riches** to enter the kingdom of God.”

Don't believe me?

Just compare it to the King James Version.

King James got it wrong; modern scholars have found the error and made the correction.

Countless preachers, myself included, have focused on this man's weakness,

That wealth was his shortcoming,

Giving us permission to ask the question,

“what is your weakness?”

and deflect attention away from the thought that we might have to part from our possessions.

Other preachers, present company included,

May suggest that Jesus' test is meant to expose the futility of self-striving piety.

Perhaps it's time to grow up;

And with hat in hand,

Recognize the shocking message of Jesus:

***Just as large animals simply do not fit through tiny opening,
So the wealthy do not fit in the kingdom of God.***

There. I've said it.

Now let's look at this passage more carefully.

It doesn't appear that wealth is the only thing that chokes out the gospel.

Returning to the metaphor of the sower

Some seeds are sown on rocky ground,

“They have no root, and endure only for a while;

then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word,

immediately they fall away.

And others are those sown among the thorns:

these are the ones who hear the word,

But the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth,

And the desire for other things come in and choke the word,

And it yields nothing.”²

Trouble, persecutions, cares of the world, lure of wealth, and desire for other things

All compete for our attention in an effort to choke the gospel.

Another point:

Just a few Sunday's ago we heard

“If any want to become my followers,”

Jesus teaches his disciples,

² Mark 4:17-19

“let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.
For those who want to save their life will lose it,
And those who lose their life for my sake, ...
Will save it.”³

Yes, indeed, Jesus, here and elsewhere,
Calls everyone of his would be followers
to radical renunciation of the self
As a condition of discipleship.

Thirdly, when we can take a step back
And look at the big picture that Mark is painting,
We can see something that is obscured by looking at the details.
Jesus’ primary call is to a life of discipleship,
Not a life of poverty.

“Come and follow,
come and follow,
come and follow,”

is the invitation Jesus makes consistently and frequently throughout Mark.
The invitation to follow Jesus stems from his love for this man in today’s lesson,
And for every other potential recruit Jesus invites.
Love drives the invitation.

Yet, another lens through which to view our gospel:
The ancient world (and many of us today) view wealth as a special blessing by God.
That is, if you prospered, it must be due to God’s approval.
At the same time, the reality on the ground in ancient Israel was different:
one obtained wealth only by collaborating with Rome.
The only people who had money were the temple priests, government workers, conscripted soldiers,
and tax collectors.
How could one be a traitor to Jews and our religion and still be blessed by God?
“Who then can be saved?”⁴ The people rightly ask.
Jesus stuns us by putting the kingdom of God seemingly out of reach:
It’s easier for a camel to fit through the eye of a needle.
Yet, in his very next breath, Jesus shakes the earth,
“For mortals it is impossible,
but not for God;
for God all things are possible.”⁵
Jesus take the impossible,
Injects the essential ingredient of discipleship,

³ Mark 8:34-35

⁴ Mark 10:26

⁵ Mark 10:27

which is faith,
And shakes it like a paint can.
Upon opening
The result is something to behold.
Discipleship is beautiful beyond comprehension:
Living in the love and grace of God,
Fulfilling God's will as it is made known.

Finally, I would observe,
Jesus asks more than simply parting with wealth.
Indeed, that would be superficial to his call to discipleship.
His call is to go a step further and redistribute his wealth among the poor.
This is more than a change in the financial statement bottom line;
Jesus tells us to change our relationship
with the poor,
the last,
the least,
the lost.
Is it possible to stop discriminating against them?
To stop zoning them out of our neighborhood?
To stop passing ordinances against the homeless?
How about dismissing the poor on the world's stage,
Using the excuse of corruption, hatred against America, el qata, terrorism, or that they will be poor
always and there isn't anything we can do about it anyways?
Before we go condemning the rich young ruler for walking away from Jesus
Because the cost was too great to bear,
Let us pause for a moment
And evaluate the cost for ourselves
Of surrendering wealth, status and power.
Is the cost too great
To place the last first,
And to take our place at the end of the line?

What does it take to become rich?
This is the question our gospel lesson for today begs us to ask.
Only you can answer this question for yourself.
The question has to do with money, yes.
But it also has to do with our relationship with Jesus Christ.
In the end,
Jesus loved him,
Even though he walked away.
In the end,
Jesus loves you,

The only question remains
Will you walk away disappointed
Or will you join Christ and remain steadfast to him?
Amen.

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