

Proper 23 - Year B
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral
Columbia, South Carolina
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Mark 10:17-31 (NRSV) ¹⁷ As 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?" ¹⁸ Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹ You 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.'" ²⁰ He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." ²¹ Jesus, 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." ²² When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. ²³ Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" ²⁴ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ It 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." ²⁶ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" ²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." ²⁸ Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." ²⁹ Jesus 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, ³⁰ who 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. ³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Our first home was in the woods of southwest New Hampshire. It was small and simple. The basement was unfinished and entirely empty, except for the large woodstove that served as our furnace, and a large pile of split wood, enough to carry us through a New England winter.

That house *was* our honeymoon. We moved in the day after our 1981 wedding and began settling in with the help of family members who had gathered for the occasion. Both of us were classical musicians in the Boston area, and like so many in that field, our living was pieced together by commuting for various part-time teaching jobs and performing gigs. We had only one piece of furniture in the house that we actually paid for. All the rest was either hand-me-down or makeshift. But even with so little, we were supremely happy.

We grew our own vegetables. We watched and learned the names of all sorts of birds. I built one of those typical New England rock walls. We hand-shoveled the snow from our 75-yard-long driveway throughout the long winters. We took our dog, and a baby in a backpack after a couple of years, went snow-shoeing through the woods and felt awe and wonder at the sheer beauty of the changing seasons. To top it off, our first two sons were born in the community hospital over in the nearby quaint village of Peterborough.

The rhythm of our life there was grounded in worship at the small granite church called All Saints, also in Peterborough. By and large, it was a fairly old-school and affluent Episcopal parish, so imagine my surprise when the Rector asked *me*, at age 30, to run the annual stewardship campaign.

This was a dilemma. For young people without much of anything in the bank, all income was precious. But a passage from Matthew hovered in my heart to challenge me:

"Do not store up treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume, and thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

I could only ask myself, "What am I storing up, and where am I storing it?"

It was the beginning of my own stewardship journey, because in reflecting on my newly assigned responsibility, it was also when I began realizing just how deeply grateful I was for God's presence and call to me. It was the moment when our family journey toward a life of tithing began, toward giving at least ten percent per year to the church. It took us a few years, and yet we've never looked back.

Today, we encounter the story in the gospel of Mark about the man with many possessions. We learn that the man in the story is rich. *Matthew's* version tells us he's also young, and, in addition, *Luke's* version tells us he's a ruler—hence our conflating all these into the commonly-used title for this parable: "The Rich Young Ruler." As a Jew, the man hoped for the Kingdom of God—a time in the future when he would be rewarded for the fruits of his faithfulness in this life, a time when he could "spend," as it were, the credit he had earned by obeying the commandments. But Jesus tells him he has to sell everything he *already has* in order to have the treasure he is so counting on receiving.

Jesus is saying to him, "In *me*, the Kingdom of God is breaking into *this* world. So, *now* is the time to give all you have, because money won't be worth anything in the age to come." Bishop N.T. Wright has pointed out that what Jesus is saying only makes sense if you realize that wealth in New Testament times was considered a concrete sign of God's pleasure. (Indeed, some people *still* believe this.) And if you obeyed the biblical law, God would reward you in the age to come.

But Jesus turns that well-accepted idea upside down, as he so often does, when he tells the man to sell everything he has and give it to the poor. The text even says Jesus "loved" him for his obedience. And yet, the shocked and grieving man walks away, unable to do what Jesus says. It's easy to imagine others walking away angrily grumbling instead, mumbling instead, "The nerve of that guy, telling me I have to give away all my hard-earned money! And to the lazy poor, no less!" In this case, Jesus proceeds to explain just how irrelevant wealth is in the Kingdom of God with his famous saying, "It 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." And while there is no evidence whatsoever for the oft-expressed idea that the "Needle's Eye" was a narrow gate in the walls of Jerusalem that camels had to have all baggage taken off them to get through, it is nonetheless colorful and compelling imagery for the spiritual act of letting go of material things.

—How tightly we hold on to what we have. And yet the spiritual truth Jesus is proclaiming is that *the way we experience freedom from money is to give it away*. That, he tells us, is what life in the kingdom of God looks like. “For it is in giving that we receive,” Jesus said.

In the story of the man with many possessions, the “Rich Young Ruler,” money is the issue. Money is always a question for parishioners in relation to their church at this time of year. And the question of money is always a heart question, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” It’s certainly a question of our spiritual relationship with money, because it’s most importantly a question of our relationship with God and each other.

For there’s another aspect of “selling” all that we have, not only for the poor, but also for the sake of each other. We can also talk about what it means to *give ourselves* for each other in this community we call “church.”

One of the most awesome, fearful, exciting and challenging realities I faced upon becoming bishop here—now some eight and a half years ago—was trying to understand, navigate and lead in the midst of a difficult theological conversation and a time of tension and uncertainty in the larger Church. Tensions and uncertainties of many sorts have magnified across the nation since then. If, as the prophet Isaiah proclaims, “Nations will stream to [God’s] Light, and kings to the brightness of [God’s] dawning,”—which, by definition, is as diverse a gathering as we can imagine—*my* role in pointing the 25,000 diverse people of this diocese toward that purpose and that gathering—that new kingdom—seemed an overwhelming call.

I’d already had enough experience in parish ministry to know that I couldn’t move a mere 600 people in the same direction by myself. What I’ve come intimately to know in this position of supposedly great “power” and “authority” within the church is how very *little* of it I can do by myself without you. We—any and *all* of us—can only be faithful servants of the Lord Jesus when we serve him *together*.

Like the man with many possessions standing before Jesus, our vocations in Christ are at best about letting go of whatever we might be holding too tightly. As I learned long ago when I *had* very little in material terms, my freedom in Christ begins when I open my hands—to God and to others.

—We loved our little home in the New Hampshire woods, and have always counted those years among the happiest of our lives. And yet, giving that up for another stage in our journey toward Christ has brought countless new, challenging, different, spiritually rich and joyful moments. But we had to let go of the one for the sake of the other.

Letting go really is a journey of the heart, having little or nothing to do with maintaining control over the money we do give, or how well we think those who receive it deserve it, or how they will use it. It’s about giving ourselves completely and unconditionally to Christ himself.