

Sermon October 11, 2009  
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Mark 10:17-31

10:17 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?"  
10:18 Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.  
10:19 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.'"  
10:20 He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth."  
10:21 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."  
10:22 When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.  
10:23 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!"  
10:24 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!  
10:25 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."  
10:26 They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?"  
10:27 Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."  
10:28 Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you."  
10:29 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,  
10:30 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.  
10:31 But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Sermon:

When I first got engaged, I remember receiving this great card from a friend. On the front it read – "The formula for success: buy low, sell high... and opening it up was the clincher – Marry Rich." Well, I did – marry Rich, that is. But I do want to make it clear that when my husband introduces himself by saying "Hi, I'm Rich" he's not giving you an update on his net worth. He's just telling you his name.

Not so with the young man in our gospel reading today. The Bible does not give his name. In many translations, he is simply known as "The Rich Young Man." or "The Rich Young Ruler". His richness, his wealth and possessions were his identity. This is not derogatory in any way, simply a description. He is not an enemy of Jesus, nor is he like the scribes and Pharisees trying to trick him or trap him. We get the sense that when he comes to Jesus, he is earnestly searching for an answer to something that is weighing heavily on his heart. He is looking for ultimate meaning and eternal life. He is at this juncture on the path of his life when he crosses paths with Jesus. He evidently had heard about Jesus, and knows him to be wise reliable teacher, a holy man and close to God. He is therefore confident about going to him for advice. This man is not coming for advice on getting wealthier by asking for stock tips, or financial advice. Instead, he asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life.

In response, Jesus tells him "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.'" Jesus knew this man's heart, he knew that he was a devout Jew, that he thought he was living a moral, upright life, and doing everything he needed to in order to please God. And so this rich young man must have been very relieved hearing this response from Jesus, knowing he had been keeping the commandments. You can almost hear the cheer, maybe even excitement in his voice when he says "I've done all those things since my youth. Yes!" But Jesus is not quite done. He continues by saying, "You lack *one* thing." Only small thing – "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." The man walked away deeply saddened, because he had many possessions.

He walked away sad, but those around Jesus, the disciples, were astounded. They could not believe what Jesus had said. He was turning their world upside down once again. The commonly held doctrine was that the rich would surely inherit eternal life. This had been a core belief of the culture for a long time. There were a few things that contributed to this belief.

First of all, at that time the synagogues and temples relied on the support of the wealthy. This young man, being devout, most likely gave money to these institutions. So since the wealthy kept these places of worship going, people believed that they were closer to God and more likely to be saved than people with no resources to support the temple. It was also a belief that God would bless the religiously wise with great wealth. Therefore, the logical conclusion was that if you were wealthy, you were religiously wise. Being rich was a sign that God was blessing you. Jesus was teaching just the opposite, was reversing deeply held tenets. So it was understandable that the disciples were perplexed at Jesus saying that it is

harder for a rich man to enter the Kingdom than it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.

It was not so much his wealth that Jesus was asking him to give up. The rich man in this story not only possessed wealth, but had begun to let that wealth possess him. It had become his security and his identity. Jesus is asking him to give that up in order to follow him.

Although it was the call of the rich young man, selling all your possessions is not the call for everyone. Obviously, Jesus and his disciples relied on those who had possessions to live. They needed places to stay, food to eat. The rich man's heart was longing for something more, yet he could not make room for it. He thought he was longing for more possessions. He was so attached to his things, so identified with and defined by his money, that there was no space in his life for him to become a follower of Jesus.

So is this the end of the story for this man? I hope not. I am, by nature, an optimist. I like to think that the young man in this story, after hearing what Jesus had to say, was shocked, surprised, and not able to commit to what was being asked of him at a moment's notice. And at least he was being honest by walking away. But perhaps a seed was planted. I would guess that most of us, in our own lives, have a difficult time making sudden, radical changes. For the majority, conversions are gradual. Perhaps later he was able to reflect on what Jesus said, and maybe started selling off some luxuries he didn't need. And then gave that money to the poor. Perhaps that began to satisfy the hunger he had in his soul, the yearning to be closer to God. Detachment often does. When we let go of things that we don't really need and are able to help others, we become more and more detached, and these things become less and less important. It is a process, but eventually we may get to the point where what is important changes. Instead of asking "How much money is this going to bring?" or "How will this help me get ahead?," we begin to ask, "How does this serve God and how does it help those in need?"

Perhaps my optimism about this young man is fueled by the encounter I had last Sunday with Dr. Paul Wright. I heard him speak at a luncheon. He could have been the rich young man in this story. He was a respected cardiologist from Youngstown, who with his partners had built a huge facility for treating patients with cardiovascular disease. He was happily married, raising a child, and they had started making plans for a costly dream home in an affluent neighborhood. He was generous with his time and money. But still, he felt he was missing inner peace and happiness. He decided that working harder, taking on more patients, and making more money would fill that longing. He tried that, but it did not bring what he yearned for. So, like the young man in our story today, he also sought out someone whom he admired, whom he felt could help direct him. He went to see Mother Teresa.

On February 1, 1992, he found himself walking toward a small homeless shelter in Tijuana Mexico. Mother Teresa was there, recuperating from heart problems. Because he sounded so desperate when he called, she had agreed to give him three minutes of her time. When he arrived, she asked him why he had come. Dr. Wright told her that he wanted to look into the eyes of someone as full of love and compassion as she was. He wanted to touch the hands of a woman so close to God. Mother Teresa put one hand on each side of his face, and looked into his eyes and blessed him. He immediately felt a sense of peace and serenity. Perhaps this is the same way Jesus looked at the young man. Mark's gospel said that before he even tells the young man what he needs to do, Jesus "looking at him, loved him". Paul Wright also received that love from Mother Teresa before receiving the answer to his question: "Mother, can you tell me how Jesus will judge me at the moment of my death?" Mother Teresa told him to read chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew. This is the parable where Jesus separates the sheep and the goats, and honors the sheep: those who fed the hungry, clothed the naked, gave drink to the thirsty, and visited the sick.

Dr. Wright, like the young man, had hoped that Mother Teresa would have assured him that he was leading a good Christian life. Maybe she would have asked him to be more generous and patient, which he would have been willing to do. But she laid out quite a different answer, quite a challenge for him. He says "I now realized clearly that the purpose of life is bound to self-sacrifice and the responsibility to serve humanity and God within humanity. The single, correct motivation must be compassion, that is, to alleviate the suffering of others, especially the poor." He knew that just understanding this was not enough. Paul Wright goes on to say "I would love to say that my transformation occurred quickly and completely, but personal growth is a slow process in which setbacks can occur almost every day."

Paul Wright stayed with Mother Teresa for three weeks in Tijuana, and then worked with her numerous times thereafter. He is now retired, and he is a medical missionary in Haiti. He has written a book entitled "Mother Theresa's Prescription" and has found the sense of peace that he had been seeking for so long.

So there is hope – for the young man in our story, for Paul Wright, for each of us. Before the young man or Dr. Wright had changed their lives, they were shown love, by Jesus and by Mother Teresa. This is where it starts. God's love for us is not conditional on what we do. It is given before anything is asked, before we even make a commitment. It is only conditional upon our willingness to receive it. Jesus knew what the rich young man needed to do, just as Jesus know what each of us needs to do in order to fully experience that love, that sense of inner peace that we all long for. What we do is our response to God's love. The love is freely given, but the more we fill our lives with material things, with our own desires for wealth,

prestige, and security, the less room we make for God's love to come in. It is when we let go, and begin to live as if we were truly loved and as if we truly wanted to follow what Jesus asks of us that we can make room for this love to come in. And when we do, we are compelled to go serve. That is our response to the receiving of God's unconditional love.

May we so long to open ourselves to God's love that we are willing to let go of that which would block us from it. And may that love compel us to follow Jesus in serving others and alleviating suffering. Amen.