

Pentecost 20, Proper 23B, 101412
All Saints Episcopal Church

Jesus said, "There is one thing you lack. Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven."

In the name of the one God, Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. Amen.

Here's something I never have dreamed I would say in a sermon: let's talk about money!

In the first-century Mediterranean world of Jesus, wealth and poverty had multifaceted meanings. Mark's gospel was written in the context of a society in which there were great extremes between the wealthy and the poor. Wealth and poverty implied not only economic status but also (and perhaps more importantly) one's place in society. The wealthy had not only an abundance of material possessions but also honor, power, and status. Judaism taught that wealth was an indication of God's favor, which further added to the status of the wealthy, but at the same time the wealthy were regarded with a certain degree of mistrust.

In contrast, the poor lacked honor and power in a culture where those things mattered a great deal. In such a culture, to be poor had far-reaching effects that touched all realms of life. The poor did not necessarily lack the basic necessities of life, but their existence was meager at best, and they were dependent on the vagaries of weather and the good will of the wealthy. Religious teachings about poverty were contradictory. While on the one hand poverty and hardship were viewed as signs of God's disfavor, on the other hand scriptures called for more equitable treatment for the poor and promised God's care for them. In this system the poor were vulnerable religiously, economically, and politically because they lacked power and honor. Justice in such a system often meant a redistribution of wealth.

So...

A man comes to Jesus asking, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus tells him that the tradition expects him to obey the commandments. The man says he has been obeying all of them since he was a kid.

Then Jesus, in the words of Mark, "looking upon him, loved him, and said to him, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.' At that saying his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions."

This is the only story in the Gospels that I know of where Jesus asks someone to come be his disciple and that person turns him down. He went away in a slump, saddened because of one thing: money.

I would guess that a lot of our faces would fall, too, because we, too, have many possessions. Although this story is among the best-known in the Gospels (it is repeated in Matthew and Luke as well as Mark), it one of the hardest to preach. Many clergy will stand up this morning in front of congregations full of men and women in their Sunday best, with bright faces, and with great possessions. While they are preaching away, these folks are making payments on 2 or 3 cars, a house, a boat, a beach house or a lake house, at least 3 or 4 TVs, 2 or 3 computers and iPads, the latest cell phones and the bundles they come in, elderly parents living with them, grown children and perhaps grandchildren living with them, children in college, the cost of eating out several times a week, a gym membership, a couple club memberships, health insurance, house insurance, car insurance, life insurance, and this morning they'll generously put a \$20 bill in the offering plate. They are good people, with good morals, they work hard, and once a year or so, they will volunteer for something at the church - maybe Vacation Bible School or the annual fundraiser.

So when the preachers get up in the pulpit and say something about how our possessions get in the way of us being able to follow Jesus, it is a huge risk that the faces of those people might fall, like the young man's did, and they will not only NOT put their \$20 bills in the plate, but they might not volunteer for Bible School next year and they might go away - really go away - mad!

It's hard to work up the courage to preach this. Most churches have a hard enough time paying bills and salaries and getting volunteers as it is; the last thing we need is to run everyone off. Maybe Jesus didn't have that worry - he didn't have a budget to keep, or salaries to pay, or maintenance on an old building to keep up with. He didn't even have a place to lay his head - no mortgage payments, no car payments, no cell phones or TVs or insurance to pay. Maybe that's the point.

But should you be sitting there right now saying to yourself, "But I'm not rich! I'm just making ends meet!" then check this out: there is a link on the internet to a site called GlobalRichList.com. If you go to it and enter your annual salary in dollars or pounds or yen, the site will tell you in what percentage of richest people in the world you fall. So I put my modest salary in the blank and pressed the button - I have enough, of course, but I never think of myself as rich with money - and it says that in the whole population of the world, I am in the top richest 0.001%. Incredible!

But what that really means, I am sad to say, is that there are SO many more people in the world who exist on between \$1 and \$3 a day - over 3 billion of them - who are, in the 21st century, dependent on the vagaries of weather and the good will of the wealthy.

When Jesus asks someone to relinquish their possessions it is not in order to reduce them to a state of poverty. Rather it is to free them to be fully committed to God, to follow Jesus as a disciple. Jesus' call to discipleship demands total commitment. Whatever it is that one values more than God or that interferes with committing completely to God must be left behind.

But the purpose of Jesus' command goes beyond even this. To sell one's possessions and distribute the proceeds to the poor is to exceed the demands of the almsgiving expected of every faithful person, and to serve justice by redistributing wealth; in essence it is to model the kingdom of God on earth.

And I have to say from personal experience, if we are feeling poor when we put the \$20 bill in the plate or when we contemplate increasing our pledge, or when we are aggravated by all the requests for our time to help those in need, believe me, it is the experience of meeting people who need us face to face that will provide the one thing we lack, as Jesus said. It is giving ourselves to the other that enables us to fill the void in our lives.

Now you know this is hard to hear. I've already said that. And it is hard to talk about. And some people come to us and ask, 'Why don't you talk about something else for a change? Why do we always have to worry about everybody else? Why don't you tell us things that will make us feel good about ourselves?' Well, the answer is because this is what the Gospel is all about. If it weren't the Gospel message, we wouldn't talk about it.

So here we are. And it's time to ask ourselves what is the cost of our discipleship? At the very least, we should examine carefully where our priorities lie and consider what it would mean to give more of what is dear to us, whether it is our money, our time, or our status in the community. It is a challenge not only to deal with those things that stand in the way of making a full commitment to *God*, but also to consider how our giving, our choices help to bring about justice in the world, how we help to bring in the kingdom of *God*. The choices we might be called to make may not be easy, but we too can be assured that *for God* and *with God* all things are possible.

Thanks be to *God*!