

Sermon Proper 23 Year B, 2024; Gospel: Mark 10: 17-31

*God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit: Open us to hear your word. Amen*

### **What Does God Require**

I think the gospel today is a difficult one. It is about a rich man asking Jesus what he needs to do to gain eternal life. We see this same story in the gospel of Matthew where the man asking the question is called simply “a young man,” and in Luke where he is called “a certain leader.” Whoever wrote Matthew and Luke obviously had access to the story in Mark, which was the first gospel written, and repeated it almost word for word—almost, but as we will see not quite. This story is known as “the rich young ruler” and is one of the most well known stories in the gospels. What immediately precedes today’s story in all three gospels is the one about Jesus blessing the little children, and saying that whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it. It was the gospel reading last week. It revealed the all-inclusive nature of Jesus’ ministry and of the Kingdom of God, where little children are not only welcome, but have priority. It is important to remember that children in 1st century Palestine had no status on the social ladder. They were of course vulnerable and dependent and subject to being victims of domination by others. They were not considered persons in their own right. That had no status or power. If we see children in this gospel as a metaphor for the “the least of these,” meaning marginalized people of all types, including the poor, then we can understand Jesus’ strong language and actions in welcoming them, his solidarity with “the least of these,” in his insistence that God’s rule exists for the lowly. Jesus has elevated “the least of these,”—the children, meaning the marginalized, the outcasts, from last to first. He has rescued them from the margins and placed them in the center of this new community, this new Kingdom. He has made clear the “preferential option” for the poor of Palestine in his solidarity with them.

Enter now the rich man in today’s gospel. The message from last week and the message from today’s gospel offer a challenging look at the Kingdom of

God that is breaking through with the life of Jesus. What is it like? How do we enter in? That is what the rich man is trying to find out. “How can I inherit eternal life?” He asks Jesus. For context remember that In Mark’s gospel eternal life is not some future destination, but rather life in the Kingdom of God right now. Jesus then tells him, seemingly in a terse and perhaps even distracted way—that he is to follow the fifth through ninth commandments of the Decalogue. Mark’s gospel, in contrast to the story in Matthew and Luke, adds another, that is “you shall not defraud,” as Jesus knew that rich landholders like this man often defrauded and exploited their clients. The man responds that he has kept all these commandments. It is important to pause here to listen to what Mark adds to the interaction prior to Jesus’ speaking. Mark says that Jesus looks at the man and that he loves him. It is almost as if the man had said something or behaved in such a way as to grab Jesus’ attention, to activate his compassion, and it changed how Jesus interacted with him. This is the only time in Mark that we are told that Jesus loves someone! The word he uses is the Greek word “agape,” meaning unconditional love. Mark is making it clear that Jesus is practicing his great commandment of love. And then, with love for this man, Jesus answers “Sell what you own, and give the money to the poor...then come, follow me.” Four commandments: go, sell, give, and follow. This invitation to the rich man illustrates the saying from last week about becoming like a child, insofar as it requires setting aside all the elements including possessions that give status and power over others. Landholders represented the most politically powerful social stratum in Mark’s Palestine. The man is a rich landholder, and even though he is loved by Jesus he is too attached to his money, his land, and his social status. He is shocked at Jesus’ invitation, and sadly he walks away grieving, for he had many possessions, and could not give them up to join this community of Jesus and follow him. The man leaves, and Jesus is left to explain all of this to his disciples. “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” Jesus tells his stunned disciples. The disciples are shocked.

The whole point of Torah, the Word, the Bible is that God blesses the rich, they presumed. Wealth is the ultimate sign of God's blessing, isn't it? And don't we hear that today, especially from the famous televangelists who preach "a gospel of prosperity"? Making money is the sure sign that God is on your side, the culture of greed tells us. "Not so!" Says Jesus. "You have it all wrong. The more wealth you have, the harder it is to enter into this Kingdom of God."

One of the memorable comments Jesus makes is his remark "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." Frederick Buechner had a contemporary paraphrase of it: "for wealthy North Americans it is harder to enter the kingdom 'than Nelson Rockefeller to get through the night deposit slot of the First National City Bank!'" It seems obvious to me that with this story about the rich man the author of Mark is passing judgment on the wealthy class.

John Dear in his book The Gospel of Peace contrasts this story of the rich man with the later story in Mark's gospel about Jesus' interaction with blind Bartimaeus as Jesus is leaving Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. As we have seen, the rich man is called but cannot leave his land and wealth and sadly turns away from Jesus. He is a member of the one percent, the upper-class elite, and he cannot follow. Bartimaeus, by contrast, is the poorest of the poor, the lowest class possible—a poor, blind, homeless beggar, with no one and nothing. When he hears the call from Jesus, he throws away his cloak and jumps at the chance to follow Jesus. Dear says that the point is that it is only when we recognize our blindness and seek true vision that we can enter into this Kingdom with Jesus. Bartimaeus did this. The rich man could not.

Dr. Jane Patterson is an Episcopal priest on staff at the Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas. She was the guest speaker at our clergy conference at Beckwith last week. On Thursday morning she did an exegesis on this passage about the "rich young ruler," and we had a lengthy discussion about it. At one point I made the comment and asked the question: "What did Jesus

mean by telling the man to sell everything he owns and give it to the poor,? and I'm not sure what that means for us today." She responded that it seems clear what he was telling the man, but she did not answer what that means for us today. And I'm not sure I get it yet. Am I—are we—really being asked to sell everything we own and give it away, and that somehow that will give us entry into the Kingdom Jesus is talking about? I want to be careful here, because I don't want in any way to minimize or water down the message in Mark's gospel today. What I believe is that each of us is called to participate in God's kingdom, each in our own unique way. I believe that you, or for me I, am the only person who can determine what that way is. Jesus knew that it was wealth that was holding the man back from following him, but there are many other things that can hold us back too—things like fear that you have nothing to contribute, a lack of confidence in your own gifts, or that your faith is not strong enough, or that you're too busy and somebody else can do it, or you're worried what somebody might think if you get "too religious." Perhaps indeed it means giving up our possessions and living more simple lives. Perhaps it means not allowing our possessions to become idols that capture us and kidnap us away from who we really are in God. It can be a real struggle, and it calls for prayerful discernment.

Cynthia and I were talking about this a few days ago, discussing Jesus' comments to the rich man, and what they mean for us today. She said this: "What Jesus wants is that we give our selves." We give our selves. I like that. We each give of our own unique gifts. In the end no one but ourselves will know the best way to serve, that is no one other than you and God. We may or may not be rich like the landholder in the gospel today, but I think we all do have wealth in the form of our special gifts. There are lots of ways to give and to serve, to find the eternal life the rich man was looking for, which for the author of Mark means life in the Kingdom, by which I mean living more Christ-like lives. And as Jesus says, in following his way "you will receive a hundredfold now in this age" (sic). The question is "Which way is right for you?"

This reflection offers a good segue way into our stewardship campaign. The theme this year is “What does God require of you?” All Saints has numerous outreach ministries in our community, and needs our support to sustain them. In addition, as you know this is an old church and parish house and it is costly to maintain, and our property insurance rates have increased drastically. Let’s all do some introspection to discover what each of us can do to keep this beautiful place and our ministries alive and well.