

The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost
October 13, 2024
Amos 5:6-7, 10-15, Psalm 90:12-17
Hebrews 4:12-16, Mark 10:17-31

The True Treasure of Grace

Jesus continues to journey toward Jerusalem to teach, and give the people some really hard sayings to consider. In the portion of the Gospel of Mark that we missed last week as we commemorated the Feast of St. Francis, some Pharisees are trying to trap him and ask him if it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife, Jesus listens to them, and then turns the conversation into an affirmation of the goodness of the marriage bond, of its sign of a covenant between the spouses, and the importance of cherishing one's partner, instead of reducing it to a contract. He gets to the heart of what is involved: the lifelong commitment of the spouses to each other in love and trust. At the same time, people were bringing their children to Jesus for his blessing, and the impatient disciples rebuked them. I suppose they thought it was beneath them, they had more important things to do! Jesus then affirmed that the reign of God is for the vulnerable, those without power, the least of these, and he blessed the children.

The Gospel writer then recounts the story we just heard. An earnest man kneels before Jesus. He doesn't walk, or approach casually and ask a question. We can picture him running up, out of breath, falling at Jesus' feet and asking him, beseeching him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus reminds him that he knows the commandments, he shall not murder, nor commit adultery, or steal, or defraud, or bear false witness, he shall honor his father and mother. The man is pleased, probably thinking to himself, "whew, I'm doing all right, I've been doing all he said for many years." We can almost see him straighten himself up and say, Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." And we can see Jesus, looking at him with love and compassion, telling him that he lacks one thing, that he needs to sell what he owns, give the money to the poor, and he will have treasure in heaven. And then he asks him to follow him. Just as he came to Matthew the tax collector, with the command to follow. As he came to Zaccheaus and asked him to come down from the tree because he was needed to host Jesus for the night. And just as he came to Peter, James, and John, busy with their nets teeming with fish, and asked them to

“follow me.” These others followed, but this young man does not. We can picture his crestfallen, deeply disappointed look, as he turns away. This is not something he expected. He is not ready to upend his life. He goes away grieving, because he has many possessions. The cost is just too great.

And friends, the cost is high. In asking the man to give up his possessions and follow, he is asking him to put his entire faith in Jesus, to surrender his life, his being, his will to him, to follow him into the unknown, to travel with him he knows not where, walking by trust, and hope that the road of sacrifice, the road of the cross that Jesus bids him follow, will lead to life and peace. To know the fullness of salvation, the man will need to accept that his own efforts to live a holy life will inevitably fall short, and he needs walk in faith and love with the Christ who will guide him on the paths that will lead to abundant life without measure.

And Jesus is asking the rich man to move beyond the safe comfortable world of his personal piety. He is asking him to step out in faith into the unknown, onto a path that will involve hardship and self -

denial, but also joy and wonder as he relies upon God's leading and grace and makes connections to new, dear brothers and sisters, and the Lord Jesus binds them together into a community of justice, mercy and peace. His safe, and rather limited life could be filled with an abundance and grace that are beyond his wildest imaginings!

Yet he turned away. And then Jesus comments, how hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God! And then, "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." Here he is indeed speaking not so much of the wealth itself, which is really neutral, but of our clinging to it, our attachment to it. And I do believe he is talking about things other than material riches. What is it that we don't want to part with? What challenge from Jesus causes us to slowly turn, crestfallen away, like the rich man? What keeps us from giving ourselves with abandon to our God? Is it the security that our material goods represent? Is it our power and position, our prestige that define us? Is it the safety of having our lives all figured out, with our vocations, our homes, our relationships, nice and cozy and familiar, that we don't want to let go of?

Now I don't think having security and goods and close families and a stable life are a bad thing. Yet, when we cling to our safe refuge, we can be in danger of closing ourselves out to the wider world, to the joy of the richness of learning from our brothers and sisters who are very different from us, the joy of being vulnerable, of admitting that we don't have all the answers, and that we can learn from each other. Maybe we are afraid to part with old resentments, which keep us estranged from others. Or perhaps we don't want to let go of the need to control, to be the masters of our own destiny, to exchange our limited vision and perspective for the wondrous freedom of life in Christ. Whatever we cling to, it is hard to let go of. And we may, like the disciples, ask in despair, "Who then can be saved?"

And then Jesus says those wondrous, hopeful words. He looks at the disciples, and us, and says "For mortals it is impossible but not for God, for God all things are possible. "For God all things are possible" This is indeed the heart of the Gospel. In the passage from the letter to the Hebrews that we heard, "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from

spirit; joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. Before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account. This does not sound like good news at all! But the one before whose eyes we are laid bare is Jesus, our Savior, our friend, our advocate, the one who gives his life for our redemption and transformation. The One who looks at us sees us, with all our sins, faults, weaknesses, and then sees even deeper, to the image of God that still shines within. We have a high priest, human like us, who has entered into the Holy of Holies for us and broken down the wall of separation that came from our side. We have a friend, an advocate, who transforms our humanity, enables us to live lives of sacrifice, surrender, joy and service. Give of yourselves, save up treasures in heaven, and let go of that which binds you and keeps you from the freedom of the love of God.

Our collect for the day bids us, to “pray that God’s grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.” We cannot let go of all we

have and follow without God's grace, and with it, we will be able share
in God's ministry of abundance in ways that will transform the world.

Come, all you blessed, and boldly seek the joy of our Lord. Amen.