

Lectionary 28 Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost Year B 2021
October 10, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”, the rich man asks. This is a question that Christians throughout the ages have worried about. It’s a question that plagued Martin Luther for much of his life. Luther found himself tormented by the question, “How do I know that I’ve done enough to be saved?” Because the difficulty is that if salvation is up to us, we can never know for sure. And certainly, most of us are left feeling a little afraid at Jesus’ answer to this man: “Sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” That’s a *tough* thing to ask, and I think we can all understand the rich man’s reaction as he leaves in shock and grief.

Now I was a picky eater as a kid, but my parents always insisted that I clear my plate at dinner. And to make things worse, I was always told that I had to make sure to eat my dinner because there were starving kids in Africa who were longing to have these foods that I refused to eat. Now, we weren’t the richest of families, but it was regularly pointed out to me that I had more than some people around the world, and even more than some people in our own neighborhood. It was enough to make me feel quite guilty at the dinner table, and usually made the food even less enjoyable.

And in that mindset, these words from Jesus were scary words. Being from a family that had more than others, should I have been taking the food that my parents gave me and sending it to someone in need? Should we be living in cardboard boxes and eating from dumpsters so that we can give all that we have to the poor? How generous do we need to be? These words challenge us because even for those of us who would not describe ourselves as rich, most of us still have *something* in relation to people living in extreme poverty in Hillsdale and throughout the world.

So, if we were to do as Jesus says and sell everything we owned, and give all that money to the poor, we would be left with nothing. How would we live? How would we eat and where would we sleep? I imagine that very few of us are ready to truly give up *everything* we have in order to follow Jesus. Yet Jesus calls us to a radical life of faith.

“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.”, Jesus says. Now, I’ve been knitting recently, and that sometimes requires threading yarn through a needle. I can tell you, that’s not always an easy task. So, I’m fairly certain that there’s *no* chance that an entire camel will fit through that little hole. Hearing these words, it certainly sounds like we are doomed. Because I don’t know anyone here who has sold everything they have and given it all to the poor.

But I don’t think that’s *exactly* what Jesus is talking about here. I don’t think that it’s wealth that is the root of the problem. Jesus doesn’t say that just because this man is rich he is doomed. The problem here is how this man *uses* his wealth. This man grieved over Jesus’ command to sell his possessions. He *loved* his stuff, and certainly he didn’t want to give his stuff away. It’s this man’s relationship to his stuff that’s the bigger problem.

And I think we can relate to that. We all certainly have possessions that we love. We have things that we would hate to give up. Perhaps a house or a car or a cell phone that keeps us in touch with loved ones who live far away. Perhaps it’s a family heirloom, or a piece of jewelry, or favorite childhood stuffed animal. And many of us get sucked into this “keeping up with the Joneses” mentality where we have to make sure we have better stuff than our friends and

neighbors—more fashionable clothes, a bigger TV for watching the game, newer furniture and appliances, or whatever else we have to have in the moment. Whether we like it or not, it is easy to let our possessions rule our lives.

We begin to say things like, “I can’t work at the food pantry next week. I’m getting my car detailed.” Or “I can’t help my neighbor with that project; I’m too busy fixing up my own house.” Or “I can’t give to the church; I’m saving up for a trip to Disney World.” We let plenty of things get in the way of our relationship with God. And this is the core of the problem. This is what Jesus objects to in today’s gospel reading.

Certainly, things come up from time to time. We can’t always drop everything and show up at church. And we can’t always be as generous as we’d like to be with our money. But we cannot allow our possessions and our money to rule our lives. We cannot make decisions motivated by only by money. We have to trust that God is always caring for us, always guiding us, and always providing for our needs.

It is so easy to get distracted by the treasures of this world. It is so easy to say, “I earned this money. It’s mine, and no one can take it from me.” And it’s not too much more of a step to say, “I can get through life all by myself. I don’t need anyone’s help, not even God.” Money can very easily draw us from God. Money can insulate us from the real issues in this world. And it can distract us from being generous with all that we have.

And when we focus only on our money and our ability to care for ourselves, we forget the most important thing: Everything we have: our selves, our lives, our possessions, and everything around us comes from God and belongs to God. We would not be here if it weren’t for God.

It is our call, therefore, to give everything we have to God. To give of ourselves, our time and our possessions, so that we might give thanks to God for giving us life. Certainly, God does not intend for us to starve so that others may be fed. And we cannot do the work of God without allowing God to provide for our needs as well. But when so many of us have the gift of excess, we must be generous with what we have. We cannot let our love of money distract us from God’s call to serve all who are in need.

One of our primary calls as Christians is to be generous, but generosity looks different for different people. When we have excess, we are called to share that excess. Now, we most often hear about generosity when it comes to money, and especially during our stewardship month, I’d be remiss if I didn’t say something about being financially generous. But there’s been a long tradition, with biblical support, that everyone is to strive to give 10% of their income to the church. And yet, the average Christian actually gives less than 1%. So, I think we need to reframe how we look at generosity. For some people, generosity will look like giving 10% of their wealth away. But for others, 10% may be entirely out of reach, and for others still, 10% may not be enough.

Ultimately, it’s not the percentage that matters. God calls us to reach outside our comfort zone in our generosity, to always stretch ourselves to give as much as we are able to the church and to the various needs of our world. And this doesn’t apply just to our money. God has also gifted us with time and a variety of skills. Perhaps we are able to help out with church projects or with work at the food pantry. Perhaps we are gifted with the ability to volunteer in worship. Perhaps we are able to knit prayer shawls for those going through difficult times. Perhaps we are able to send cards to those we keep in prayer. Perhaps we are able to teach. Perhaps we are gifted with the ability to raise awareness and fight for justice. Perhaps we are able to share our lives of faith with those around us. Whatever gifts God has given you, you are called to be generous.

By being generous with our money, our time, and our skills, we are proclaiming freedom from the grip that our money and possessions seek to hold on us. We are proclaiming that although money is a necessity for many things within our world, it does not rule our lives. In living generously, our focus shifts away from our money and possessions, and our hearts turn back toward God.

And yet, this is still a hard teaching. It makes so much more sense to hold on tightly to our money and our stuff, especially since we never seem to have enough of it. But thankfully, there's more to this passage than a call to sell all that we own.

Neither our money nor our generosity will save us. When we reflect on Luther's question, "When do I know that I've done enough in order to be saved?" in the context of just this encounter with the rich man, most of us will see ourselves destined for hell. Yet we forget that God loved this man before he did anything, and God provided for him throughout his life, granting him the blessings of wealth and comfort. He didn't have to earn God's love and favor; God already loved this man, and God loves all of us, too.

The truth is that no matter how generous we are, we're never going to sell all our possessions and give all the money away. The real point of this story is to tell us that we cannot enter the kingdom of God on our own doing. We will never live a perfect life, perfectly loving, perfectly generous, perfectly righteous. We cannot save ourselves. But Jesus goes on after his encounter to tell us that, "for God, all things are possible." We cannot save ourselves by selling all our possessions or by any other action, but God makes our salvation a reality through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We are called to live generously, to give our money, our time, our skills, and our talents for the work of God. But our generosity will fall short. And when that happens, God catches us with God's grace and mercy, and God grants us the gift of salvation. Thanks be to God. Amen.