

21 Pentecost Mark 10:17-31
Christ and Grace October 14, 2018
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There's a story about an evangelist who, after preaching a long sermon, gave an altar call. "Come to the altar and give your life to Christ!" he said. Nobody came. In frustration, the evangelist said, "Come to the altar, as a way of saying that you love and honor God." Still nobody came. In even greater frustration, the evangelist appealed to the congregation, "Come to the altar as a way of saying that you want to live a better life." Nobody came. Finally he begged, "Okay then, if you love your mother, come down to the altar!"

In our Gospel reading today Jesus is issuing an altar call of sorts. A man of some wealth comes to Jesus with a question and Jesus calls the man to follow him, calls him to be a disciple. And not unlike that congregation listening to the evangelist, the wealthy man also had a hard time answering Jesus' call. The man came to Jesus with good intentions. He was a good man. He ran up to Jesus, knelt, and asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" It's a great question! And sadly, the church has been trying to make the answer complicated ever since! Because it's human nature to want to have the answers to our questions. And when we don't get the answers we want, sometimes we walk away.

The man *wanted* to follow Jesus. And the scripture tells us that Jesus loved him and stood ready to welcome him. But something stood in the way. Something else called out for his attention. Perhaps it was the need for many possessions that stopped him in his tracks, or maybe he feared what a deeper relationship with Jesus might require of him. When the man heard Jesus' words "go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven," he was shocked, and in the end he went away grieving. What if underneath this man's question there was a deeper concern that he needed to do more; that things were not yet ordered as they should be in his life. What if he was struggling with things that possessed him like addiction, or a need for control or power? Perhaps he could not let go of long held resentments or anger. Even so, Jesus called him and Jesus loved him.

So how do we know then? How do we know that our lives are ordered? How do we know how many possessions are too many possessions? How many things must we give away, let go of, to score enough points to win the game of eternal life? We work hard to earn a living - must we sell everything and give it all to the poor? And if we have no resources then how are we supposed to help the poor? My guess is the wealthy man had questions like these. My guess is some of us have questions like these.

Can we consider that God gives us resources so that we can help others, so that we *do* have something that we can regularly give away to those in need? Can we believe that God asks each one of us to give of our abundance, not because God wants us to have nothing, but so that we will experience the joy that comes with giving, the joy that comes when we love our neighbors as ourselves?

Remember though that Jesus asked the man to do something more. Something more than give ... Jesus asked the man to follow him - to walk in the way of Jesus and be a disciple.

How do *we* walk in the way of Jesus? How do we equip one another to be disciples? All of us here at Christ and Grace are part of this amazing enterprise where we can give and receive and learn to be disciples. This means that we are invited to participate in various ways. As each of us finds a ministry to engage in by volunteering – it ensures that our ministries can continue. For example, we can say we want to feed the hungry at the Hope Center but if we don't have 5-6 volunteers each time, we cannot do that effectively. We believe that children's ministry is important - will we join in this ministry to teach our children, who are our future? We value pastoral care – will we help with our beautiful celebration of life ministry?

We also participate through financial giving and pledging, and they are different. Giving is good, and one-time gifts when there is a need, such as our roof renovation or stained glass window repairs, are a blessing. Sometimes though, we may forget to give, or we are afraid we might need it later, or we rationalize that after we pay all our bills then we will give what is left over to the church.

Pledging is making a commitment to give. When we pledge to give financially, the Vestry can then plan responsibly to support formation and worship, outreach and mission, youth programming and pastoral care, all those things that are dear to us in this church. When the Vestry knows what the resources are, it can then begin to plan ahead, to form a vision and then fund that vision.

But there is a second, more important aspect of pledging. Making the commitment to pledge is a spiritual discipline. When we commit to give consistently – even if it's only a small amount, we are making a conscious decision to be thankful, and to trust that God will provide all that we need. I think this is what happens when we are walking in the way of Jesus – we become generous and giving becomes our joyful response.

When we commit by making a pledge to give, or by volunteering to participate in the many ministries that help us to spread God's love – whether we are able to give one percent or ten percent, whether we can do one ministry or ten, each of us is an important part of the whole, a necessary piece of the pie in our work in the Kingdom of God.

One of the misperceptions by people in church is that there are plenty of people to do what needs to be done. And so sometimes we don't think our volunteering or our giving is essential. We might not think our gift will make a difference. But the truth is that no matter the size of the church, each person is needed and valued. We are all part of the Body of Christ and all are necessary. However we choose to volunteer, and whatever our pledge amount might be, it's all important - it's all vital to the health of our congregation, and more importantly it's good for our spiritual health.

Let's return to the rich man's question for Jesus: "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" His question already hints at a deeper answer. What can anyone do in order to inherit anything? Inheritance is more about belonging to a family than earning something. Leaving everything and following Jesus, as Peter says the disciples have done, brings them into a new family. Our commitment to participate in the life of Christ and Grace brings us into a new family.

There is nothing we can *do* to inherit eternal life; it is a gift, it is pure grace. It is Jesus looking at us with great love. Disciples then *and* now keep asking, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them, and looks at us, with love, and says, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

Amen.