

Twenty first Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas
13 October 2024

Mark 10:17-31

The gospel today reminds me of the comic strip *Peanuts*. My favorite character in Peanuts is Linus. You remember him: he is Lucy's younger brother and Charlie Brown's best friend. Linus is unusually smart for his age, he is a great pitcher, and often he saves the day by the use of his intellect. He is also the most religious of the group, not just because he believes in "The Great Pumpkin," but because he delivers the great monologue about the meaning of Christmas during the Peanuts Christmas Special. Linus is a great kid, but he has a problem. He has an almost unhealthy attachment to his blue blanket. At least this is what Lucy, the blanket-hating Grandmother, and even Snoopy think. The three of them are constantly trying to take the blanket from Linus, without much success.

You may be wondering what Linus van Pelt has to do with the Gospel today. Well, let me tell you. Mark today tells us a story of a young man who approaches Jesus, as he and the disciples are "on their way" to Jerusalem. The young man asks, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Let us reflect on that question, which makes no sense. It is as if I go to Elon Musk and I ask him, "Excuse me Mr. Musk, can you please tell me what I can do to inherit your fortune?" I bet it would take Mr. Musk less than two minutes to get me kicked out of his place. This would be an appropriate reaction to my impertinence.

Inheritances are not an automatic birth right, or something we work for. Not even a son has the right to go to his dad and say, "Give me my inheritance." We see many cases where some older person dies and leaves everything not to his kids, but to his new wife, or to a foundation, or even to a library. There is nothing we can do to earn eternal life; this is a gift that the Father gives to whomever he wishes to give. Jesus replies to the youth man, "You know the commandments..." and then he proceeds to list them. I can imagine the young man smiling in a self-satisfied manner. This was going to be easier than he thought. If all he had to do was follow the commandments, then he had no problem. He was a righteous man as evidenced by his wealth. He was on safe ground; he was used to following the rules of the law in a meticulous manner. He eagerly replies, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Jesus looks at the young man with love and with compassion. He knows that the young man is like Linus van Pelt. He too has a security blanket he carries around and will refuse to give up.

This blanket provides him comfort, makes him feel blessed by God, and makes him feel proud that he has arrived. This blanket reminds him daily that he has achieved what others can only dream of. The blanket gives him status, a name, a respectable position within his community. This blanket called wealth, makes the young man feel like he is on top of the world. Yet, there is a hunger in his heart. There is a need for depth and meaning. This is the reason he comes to Jesus. He knows that this man from Galilee has the answer to his problem. Jesus tells him, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor ... then come, follow me." With love in his voice Jesus challenges the young man. He thinks that he has arrived and yet his wealth serves as a barrier that distances him from God and from his brothers and sisters. His wealth makes him satisfied and comfortable, but Christ came to earth to care for the hungry, the poor, and those who need him. The rich man has no need of Jesus, as long as he continues to clutch to the safety blanket of his wealth. The only way for this young man to follow Jesus is to become vulnerable, needy, dependent, and receptive, like a little child.

The Holy Scripture tells us the young man, "was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions." He went away feeling very sad. The price was much too high for him to pay. He was not ready to realize how desperate his condition was. He was not ready to sell all his possessions to come and purchase the great pearl. He was not ready to lose the reputation and standing wealth provided him. There is something in me that makes me feel empathy for this young man. After all, he did have the courage to come to Jesus, the humility to kneel in his presence and ask his question, and the lifestyle of a religious man who had followed the commandments since youth. I believe there was a sincere search that brought this young man to Jesus, and I respect the honesty of his search.

Jesus turns to his disciples and says, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! 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." By this Jesus doesn't mean that wealth is in and of itself evil, what can make money, and any other valuable possession for that matter, a true curse is its capacity to steal our hearts and souls. The Biblical saying that the love of money is the root of all evil may apply here. This young man, even though honest in his quest for eternal life, was not looking for a radical lifestyle change, but rather he was looking for another rule to keep. He wants a simple formula: pray more, attend church every Sunday, say three "Our Fathers" before going to bed, etc. He wanted to do something to earn his inheritance. What Jesus offers him, however, is a complete change of heart, and a radically new lifestyle.

The Biblical record leaves no doubt that this young man loved his money. And this love is the reason for his ultimate decision to walk away. He walked away to continue to accumulate shiny new toys, more power and prestige, more respect and admiration of the people, more envy from the poor, and more admiration from the middle class. But, let me finish the story. Let me tell you the part of the story the Bible does not tell us. This young man became even more wealthy, and one day he died! Plain and simple, he died, and we don't even know his name. He is just the *Rich Fool*, or the *Young Rich Ruler*, or some other equally vague title. We don't know his real name, we don't know what happened to his great fortune, we don't know who was left behind to enjoy the fruits of his labor. All we know is that he died and didn't take his shiny toys with him. He could not take the great fortune that caused him to turn away from Christ. His vast holdings were not sufficient to ensure his salvation. He simply died and vanished into absolute obscurity.

He fulfilled Jesus' prophesy that "Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." Now, let us build a bridge to today. I think we too have our security blankets. Each one of us is Linus. We too find comfort in our possessions. And many of us enjoy the sense of security money brings us. The invitation of Jesus today to become needy and dependent on him applies as much to us today as it applied to the young man a little over 2000 years ago. The attitude of self-reliance and self-dependance that comes from wealth can build a wall of separation between us and God, and between us and our brothers and sisters. In this sense "to be rich" is different from "to act rich". To act rich is to act as though we don't need God in our lives. But we can be rich and still be as humble as one who realizes that money is just a tool, a gift God gives us to improve our life and the lives of those around us. God gives us wealth not to see how powerful we can become, but to see what we would do with such wealth. We can have our possessions and still place our life at the service of the Lord. We can act in humility and contribute generously to the care of the poor, the care of God's church, and the care of those who depend on us. We can be a wealthy person and still accept Christ in our heart, welcome him into our life, and have him cleanse the selfish motivations of our hearts.

Let us pray today that God will give us a generous heart to be responsive to the needs of the poor in our communities, our state, our country, and our world. Let us ask God to make us as dependent on his son, as a small child is dependent on his parents. We ask all of this in Jesus name. Amen!

