

20th Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

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*Mark 10:17-31*

*As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother." ' He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.*

*Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is 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.' They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'*

*Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.' Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'*

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A wonderful translation of the Gospels is a book called "The Cotton Patch Gospel" which was written by Clarence Jordan and it tells the stories of the gospels as if in modern day, rural Georgia. I'd like to share with you all Jordan's version of today's passage from "The Cotton Patch Gospel."

*One day a fellow came to him and said, "Doctor, what is the good that I should follow in order to get spiritual life?"*

*"Why are you inquiring about 'the good'?" Jesus asked. "'The good' is one. But if you want to come into the life, abide by the rules."*

*The fellow said, "Which ones?"*

*Jesus answered, "Why, the ones that say, 'Don't murder, don't sleep with someone you're not married to, don't steal, don't lie, take care of your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself.'*

*"I've kept them all," cried the young man. "Why am I still flunking?"*

*"If you want to be a mature man," Jesus said, "go, sell your stuff, give it to the poor—you will be spiritually rich—and then come share my life." When the young fellow heard that bit, he walked away crying, because he had quite a pile. Jesus said to his students, "I'm telling you a fact; a rich man finds it extremely*

*difficult to come into the God Movement. I say it again, a pig can go through a knothole easier than a rich man can get into the God Movement."*

*Upon hearing this, the students were completely flabbergasted. "Who can make the grade?" they asked.*

*Jesus looked straight at them and said, "Humanly speaking, this is impossible, but with God anything can happen."*

*Then Peter popped off, "Look at us! We have thrown everything overboard and shared your life, so how will we come out?"*

*Jesus answered, "Let me tell you something: When the new order is ushered in and the son of man takes office, then you all who have shared my life will be appointed to the twelve posts of the cabinet and will be responsible for the functioning of the new government. And anybody who has thrown overboard houses or brothers or sisters or fathers or mothers or children or farms for the sake of my cause will get them back a hundred times over, and will also receive spiritual life. But many on top will be on the bottom and many on the bottom will be on top.*

First, let me apologize. It's rather ironic that your genuinely southern pastor has a really terrible southern accent when he tries. The reason I like this version of this passage and I am lifting it up before you today is that it takes the language of the NRSV and reframes it to a more present context. And here I am not talking about simply putting the text in a more modern vernacular. Rather, I am referring to the way this "Cotton Patch" version speaks of the Kingdom of God and eternal life.

In your version of the bible, it is likely that the rich, young man's initial question sounds something like this: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Now there are two interesting peculiarities about this phrase. First of all is the fact that the man is asking what he must do to *inherit* eternal life. Typically, someone does not do *anything* to inherit something; it is usually inherited simply because he or she is related to someone. Secondly, the phrase "eternal life" suggests what we often think of when we think of the "Kingdom of God" or "heaven." Eternal life sounds like something that we either will or will not receive when we kick the bucket and waltz up to St. Peter at the pearly gates.

It's a rather individualistic question when you think about it. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" It's all about me. What do I get after all of this is said and done? What's in it for me? Is this investment going to have a good payback?

However, the Cotton Patch version of today's story has the young, rich man asking "what is the good that I should follow *to get spiritual life?*" Now, *that's* a different question. I don't know about you but when I hear that version of the question I hear a concern that has more to do with present transformation than it does future salvation. What I hear in that version of the question is a man asking not what will happen to him when he dies but rather what he can do to be transformed right now while he lives.

That, in my opinion, is a much more mature question. Now, to this question, Jesus replies by saying, "OK, well, let's start with the "easy" stuff. Have you followed the Ten Commandments?"

"Yes," he says while some of the disciples snicker, "but I still feel like I have a lot of room to grow."

"Ok," Jesus says, "Go, sell your stuff, give to the poor, and come share my life."

The man's countenance falls, a mixture of amazement and concern stares back at Jesus and, without saying a word, the man walks away crying because, as the Cotton Patch gospel says, he had "quite a pile."

One of the many truths of this passage is that the gospel is not just about refraining from doing bad things but it is equally about challenging ourselves to do good things. Sometimes we do this well and sometimes we don't. That is why so often in our prayers of confession we confess for that which we have done *and* that which we have left *undone*.

Secondly, another truth of this passage is that the topic of discipleship and the topic of money are often much closer to one another than we might like. We don't like to talk about money in our normal lives, least of all from the comfort of our pew on Sunday mornings. This is perhaps ironic because Jesus actually talked about money a good bit. This is one of many times that Jesus brings up the intersection between being a faithful follower of the Way and being good stewards of our money.

So let's go a little deeper as to why this rich, young man struggled to digest this invitation that Jesus gave him. How could he master the art of following the commandments and fail to give one penny to the poor?

My thesis is this: it didn't cost the man one penny to follow the commandments. Think about it, all of the things that Jesus lists off to the man *did not* require him to spend any money.

It doesn't cost any money to refrain from murder. One typically doesn't have to write a check to keep from committing adultery. Stealing doesn't require money. You don't have to stop by the ATM to refrain from giving false testimony. And you certainly don't need a healthy stock portfolio to respect your mother and your father.

All of the things this rich, young man has mastered in order to be a "good" person haven't cost him a dime. It required no financial investment. It was free (in terms of *his* definition of free). And yet, he must have felt that something was still missing because, otherwise, why would he have come to Jesus with his question in the first place?

After listening to the man, Jesus gives him what most (if not all) of us would consider an extreme invitation: Jesus tells him to go, sell all that he has, give it to the poor, and to follow him. The man can't do it because he has been trained that discipleship doesn't cost a dime. Because he has been taught that being a "good" person is merely a "spiritual" exercise that doesn't cost any of what he *really* values, he goes away saddened because he has "quite a pile."

And then Jesus turns to his disciples and says, *"I'm telling you a fact; a rich man finds it extremely difficult to come into the God Movement. I say it again, a pig can go through a knothole easier than a rich man can get into the God Movement."* I love this translation because it uses the phrase "God Movement" instead of Kingdom of God. Now, I am *not* advocating that we make this a permanent replacement. But for the purposes of today's passage I find it a suitable conversation starter. Like I said before, we unfortunately have come to understand the Kingdom of God as something that will come "later." We understand the Kingdom of God as something that will happen only when Jesus "comes back" and we have all departed this world for the next. However, in the context of the gospels, the Kingdom of God is not that simple. Too be sure, one part of the Kingdom of God is the eternal reign of God when death and dying and tears will be no more. But an equally important part of the Kingdom of God is *here and now*. We believe that the incarnation of Jesus as a human brings about it the fruition of the Kingdom of God

here and now. And by being followers of Jesus, we are invited to participate in the Kingdom of God here and now by preaching and doing the Gospel in word and in deed.

That is why I love that the Cotton Patch Gospel replaces the phrase “Kingdom of God” with “The God Movement.” I love it because it reminds us that we are part of a movement - something that is taking place here and now. And in order for that movement to continue, for the poor to be fed, and the homeless to be housed, and the sick to be healed, and the grieved to be comforted, and the voiceless to be heard, we must give of ourselves and that means that we must invest our money as well.

Now, it's important to realize that this story is a particular story of Jesus with a particular person. For the record, I do not believe that a rightful interpretation of this passage is that every member of Shelter Island Presbyterian Church should give up every single penny and leave this island to “go follow Jesus;” that would leave even more people in need than there already is. However, I do believe that this passage calls us to admit that one of the toughest things to overcome in order to join the God Movement is our tendency to trust our money rather than God's providence.

It really is a matter of trust. The reason, I believe, that the young, rich man could “follow the commandments” is that doing so did not require him to relinquish that which he trusted. But since his full trust was on his money, he couldn't surrender a penny to the poor.

Now, we must be careful not to take this passage to extremes and, by doing so, dismiss it. Some excuses that we might come up with to get us out of this passage might go something like this:

“I'm not rich so this doesn't apply to me.”

“I already give money to the church so this doesn't apply to me.”

“I have a family to support so this doesn't apply to me.”

“I give of my time and my talents instead of my money so this doesn't apply to me.”

“I give to plenty of other good causes, so this doesn't apply to me.”

Friends, I have some tough news and some good news. The tough news is this: this passage applies *to every one of us!* The good news is this: this passage applies *to every one of us!* This text applies to us because we are blessed in many ways and money is one of them. Now, because of circumstances and responsibilities, what that monetary amount is varies from person to person. However, we would all do well to remember that the monetary standard of Shelter Island is enormously higher than the other 99% of the world.

But since this applies to every one of us, that is also good news, because we are called together joyfully to share that which have. The God Movement has been flourishing in this congregation since 1743: why stop now? Let's keep going! Let's keep growing! Let's give! Let us trust in that which God is calling us to be by trusting in the God who calls us *to be* in the first place! Let us remember that every dollar we entrust to God is an investment in the present transformation of those we encounter and minister to and with together. Let us remember that every dollar we entrust to God is an exercise in the God Movement. Let us remember that, together, we fund our mission to “move God's abundance” around this island and off of it that we might be good stewards. Let us give joyfully so that when God calls us to follow, instead of going away tearfully, we can go away with a song on our lips because the God Movement is alive in our lives and we have been called to share it!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.