One Thing

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

My wife, Chris, and I were talking one evening in late January. Chris pays close attention to the news and often clues me in to what is going on in the world. She used a word in our conversation I had never heard before; sequestration. I had to ask what she meant by the term. Sequestration was an altogether new word to me.

Sequester means to divide or separate something. In this town, it equates to a budget cut nobody wants to reduce a deficit that everybody wants reduced.

This word does funny things to elected officials on Capital Hill. It causes rank and file citizens a considerable amount of angst. Will it disrupt my air travel? Will it delay food getting to my grocery store? Will it jeopardize our nation’s national defense? Will it cost me my job?

We selected the rich, young ruler story for this Sunday months ago. We decided to preach on Luke’s gospel and engage in four months worth of sermons on Jesus’ birth, life, death and resurrection. Our primary aim is to connect our individual stories with God’s Big Story of redemption. How were we to know that the drama being played out in sequestration would dovetail so nicely with the story of the rich, young ruler? You’ll see what I mean as I retell the story.

Luke identifies the man in our lesson simply as a ruler (18:18). Matthew, in his parallel account, informs us that he is young. All three gospels describe him as wealthy (18:23). The man is appropriately named a rich, young ruler.

He asks Jesus, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (18:18). It is the only instance in the gospels where someone calls Jesus by the name, “good teacher.” Jesus’ response seems almost rude. “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone” (18:19). Could Jesus be having a bad day?

I suspect something else is going on here. Mark tells us, in his parallel account of this story, that Jesus loves this man (10:21). Perhaps Jesus wants to poke a hole in this man’s breezy definition of goodness.

The man’s question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” is identical to the question the lawyer asked in last Sunday’s story. The words
“do” and “inherit” seem contradictory to each other. People do in order to earn while people inherit in order to receive. We can’t do anything to receive eternal life if comes to us as inheritance. Eternal life is not a matter of earning, but of receiving.

It’s curious that the story which precedes this rich, young ruler centers on children. People are bringing children to Jesus to receive his blessing. Jesus’ disciples are put off, thinking Jesus has more important things to do. Jesus chides them with his words, “Truly I tell you whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (18:17). The IRS is right about one thing, children are dependents. They depend upon adults for what they need. The only way to enter the kingdom of God is to receive it as a child.

Jesus then seizes the moment to summarize the last six commands of the 10 Commandments. Our ruler confidently asserts that he has kept all ten.

“You still lack one thing,” Jesus says. “Sell all that you own, give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (18:22). This is the point in the story when Luke tells us the man is wealthy. His money looms as the one thing that will keep him from following Jesus.

While this man had kept all the commandments related to his obligations to other people, somehow he side-stepped the first command, “You shall have no other gods before me.” I wonder how he’s doing with the second command also: “You shall not make for yourself any graven image.” Do you catch the irony here? The man asks Jesus what he can do to inherit eternal life, yet he’s unwilling to let go of temporal things in exchange for this kind of life.

Jesus declares, in no uncertain terms, how hard it is for wealthy people to enter the kingdom of God. “Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (18:25). This is hyperbole at its finest. Jesus deliberately contrasts the largest animal in Palestine with the smallest opening. It’s ludicrous for a camel to pass through an eye of a needle, which is precisely Jesus’ point. A camel cannot fit through the eye of a needle, just as wealthy people cannot inherit the kingdom of God.

Jesus’ disciples are shocked by these words. “Who then can be saved?” (18:26). In Jesus’ day, wealth was a sign of God’s favor while poverty was an indicator of divine displeasure. (This attitude still persists in our day). If rich people can’t be saved, what hope is there for the rest of us?

I love Jesus’ closing line, “What is impossible for mortals [or mere men] is possible with God.” The only way any of us
Wealth creates a false sense of security....

are saved is due to God’s mercy.

Luke doesn’t tell us what happens to this rich, young ruler. Matthew and Mark supply the details. He decides not to follow Jesus because he cannot part with his money.

This story haunts me. According to the world’s standard of living, I am wealthy. It’s disconcerting to hear Jesus pronounce how hard it is for wealthy people to enter the kingdom of God.

We cannot read this passage apart from the rest of Luke’s gospel or the other gospels. Three things stand out as I survey what Jesus teaches about money and discipleship.

First, this is the only person in the gospels that Jesus directs to sell all he owns and give to the poor as a precursor to following him. Clearly, there’s something about the man’s wealth that gets in the way of following Jesus.

Second, wealth isn’t in the gospels as the only barrier to following Jesus. All manner of things can stand between us and God.

Third, Jesus’ primary call in the gospels is to discipleship, not a life of poverty. While this passage is the only instance where Jesus calls someone to sell everything, his call to discipleship is universal. Consider the previous chapter in Luke’s gospel. At the outset, Jesus announces to would-be disciples, “Follow me!” In the middle of Luke, Jesus encoun-
ters several men in his travels to which he says, “Follow me” (9:57-62). He doesn’t say anything about selling what they have, yet he is emphatic about following him.

Why does Jesus single out this man’s wealth? The answer is rather simple: because it stands in the way of him becoming a disciple. Money can easily become a rival to God. It can assume idolatrous proportions. Maybe that’s why we call it “the Almighty Dollar.” There is something alluring about money which causes people to do really stupid things to get it. Jesus is not merely concerned with what we are doing with our money; he is equally interested with what our money is doing to us. Wealth creates a false sense of security, as the sequestration crisis clearly dramatizes to us.

John Piper serves a large church in the Minneapolis area. He is a well-known preacher in Christian circles and a prolific author. Two years ago, he took an eight month sabbatical from his pastoral duties to conduct a “soul inventory.” He unplugged from social media and refrained from preaching to conduct this self-appraisal. A number of “besetting sins” emerged from his soul inventory. The phrase, “besetting sin” is taken from the book of Hebrews, in which the author implores us to “Lay aside every sin which so easily besets us” (12:1). Beset is an and surround. Besetting sins
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are those vices which chronically and persistently bring us down. I was impressed by Piper’s courage in identifying his besetting sins to his congregation upon his return. He singled out anger, quickness to blame, self-pity, selfishness and sulleness.

Would that all of us would conduct such a fearless self-inventory! Some of you become annoyed when I talk this way. You’d rather I talk on something more cheerful like happiness. I’m not trying to shame or guilt us into believing. I want us to see that sin is anything that stands in the way of following Jesus. And since our principle aim is following Jesus, we want to eliminate anything that gets in the way. Our goal in such an inventory is not becoming morbid or excessively self-critical. Our aim is spiritual maturity not groveling.

I came across a book this week to commend to you. I haven’t read this book in its entirety, but my initial read impresses me. It’s written by Michael Mangis, professor and psychologist at Wheaton College outside Chicago. It’s entitled Signature Sins: Taming our Wayward Hearts.

A “signature sin” equates to a besetting sin. It’s our chief or principle sin that afflicts us with surprising regularity. It’s the kind of sin that when confronted with it, we find ourselves saying to ourselves, “Oh, yeah, that sin.” There are some sins that are so second nature to us that we almost forget they’re there. But they are there and they frame our very identity.

Mangis challenges us to name our signature sin. All of us have a specific sin pattern that is fueled by culture, family, temperament and gender.

He then implores us to leverage spiritual practices to combat our signature sins. Let’s suppose your signature sin is worry. How could we leverage prayer and Scripture meditation to center us in God’s security? Trusted spiritual friends provide a reality check on assessing worry. Mangis believes spiritual friends are crucial to liberating us from enslaving sins.

What we’re talking about here is creating a spiritual growth plan to help us achieve what our hearts long for, which is true security. On a weekend when everyone is obsessing about sequestration, what an exquisite passage to draw us back to real security. Eternal security can never be satisfied with temporal pursuits. As we come to the Lord’s Supper, we are reminded that true security is found only in Jesus Christ.