

Proper 23 B 2021  
Mark 10:17-23  
**Leaving Everything**

Some time ago, a teacher of mine told me that you could tell something about a person by the questions he asked. Living inside a tradition that values questions, we are used to asking all kinds of things, from what actually happens at the altar to where we are going to put our resources this year, how we are going to deal with contagion, some of which feel safer than others. So it is refreshing to hear a question that feels truly dangerous to us, body, mind and spirit. In fact, it sets our pulses running a little faster because it is kind of holy cost-benefit analysis involving our life with God, something in a different category from which prayer form we use or what the color of the day is today.

Maybe our hearts beat faster because we know where today's gospel is going practically from the time the rich young man opens his mouth: Good Teacher, what do I need to do to inherit eternal life? We don't actually know that he is young or rich-- Luke and Matthew provide those details-- except by the question he asks. It is not, "Why is it so hard to feed my family these days", or, "Why is it so hard to find work?" It is, "what can I do to inherit eternal life"—what can I do to have the fullest life with God imaginable? The response that Jesus gives, that he needs simply to observe the Law, "You shall not murder, commit adultery or steal," is hardly an answer; it is something that any schoolchild would have known, and so we hear the man say that he has done all that. It is a bar that even most of us could clear.

But then there is that heart-breaking moment when Jesus looks at the man on the way, not far from the walls of Jerusalem, and loves him because he knows what is coming, as do we. "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". These words are so terrifying because we are used to thinking in terms of what we do to live, to really live; to give up your possessions, which the man is famously unable to do, asks us a question about who we are, what gets in the way of a life fully lived in the love of God. It is an invitation, not unlike the one he has given his other disciples, but it is an expensive one, not because it asks of us what we have but because it asks what our relationship with the living God is worth, along with all the brothers and sisters sitting next to us.

To "follow me" is to put those relationships ahead of everything else in our lives. Because it is ultimately neither poverty nor wealth that make the kingdom ours, but the simple willingness to be free from all that pulls us outside of that love for God and each other. To inherit, after all, does not require that we do anything; it is the gratitude of our response that matters. Desmond Tutu, who has seen ninety years of these interactions, has observed that we have allowed "a culture of achievement and success to evolve, assiduously encouraging a rat-race mentality. We forget that God loves us unconditionally whether we succeed or fail. As we move closer to God, we too can love one another, like brothers and sisters, regardless of our flaws and our failures". God looks across at us, even in the midst of our failures, our insistence that we have done that all already, and loves us more deeply than we can imagine.

Who then can be saved? I once knew an old retired bishop from Atlanta who began a program for at-risk kids in the poorest part of the city. The Work of Our Hands began as a project to help these kids with woodworking. They would learn to turn bowls, candlesticks and other pieces, and he convinced me one day to give it a try. My own attempt looked a little like the pathetic specimens I would bring home from my home-ec. classes when I was their age, but many of these young people had a real gift for this work, and many of the pieces were sold through area churches. For one of my birthdays, someone bought me a bowl. I still have it; it is small and curved with a grey stain on one side, where fungi had invaded the grain of the wood. I have kept it because it reminds me of myself, trying to do the work of the kingdom though my own flaws and brokenness. Mostly, though, I have kept it for the

relationships they bring to mind, with an old man willing to give his time to underserved kids with nowhere to go, relationships with kids with little else in their lives who taught me how to offer themselves to make something beautiful.

Not that any of this is easy, mind you. In fact, Jesus makes it sound hopeless to even begin, those of us with mortgages, with kids in school, with a spouse sick in the hospital. And so our own cry becomes Peter's, when he reminds Jesus, "Look, we have left everything and followed you". They are standing there with their mouths open, looking at this young man as he walks away in despondency. In these terms, what hope is there for anyone? And Jesus looks at them, without judgment, only love. If we tell the truth about ourselves, we are a little like the children from last week's gospel and this rich man. We bring ourselves before God, limited in what we know and covered in our own messes and yet, incredibly, we are welcomed, loved and blessed. But the only way there is not through what we have or even what we give but the trust in the relationships for which we offer it. Eternal life is both a promise and a here-and-now reality, and it begins in letting go of what seems most precious to us.

We all aren't called to heroic sacrifice; it is all many of us can do to make it from one week to the next. I have always thought that the people who compiled the lectionary had a sense of humor, putting this lesson so close to the time when we consider how to be stewards of the church, the materials and programs that help sustain our lives together. But if what I am saying is about stewardship, it is about being stewards of one another. The Church is not a building but people; our charge is to nurture one another in our journeys toward real discipleship. What we are called to be is free, free from everything that stands in the way of being completely in love with God and to see that love in each other. There are days when it will set our hearts racing simply to think about getting the kids through college, or even keeping the lights on; how can we even think about anything like our salvation. But the answer that comes back at us is simple and it is always the same: all things are possible-- with God, all things are possible.