

A sermon preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT
Proper 23-B on October 10, 2021 by The Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton
Amos 5:6-7, 10-15. Psalm 90:12-17. Hebrews 4:12-16. Mark 10:17-31

For 2,000 years people have been hearing or reading today's Gospel. Sometimes people have just ignored it. Sometimes people have argued with it. Sometimes people have tried to go deeper to understand what Jesus was trying to say. Sometimes people have heard it and allowed it to change the way they live their lives. I wonder, when you leave worship this morning, what will your response be to the challenges Jesus gives us all in today's gospel?

As the story begins, Jesus was about to leave for another village, when a man came running up to him, wanting to talk before he left town. The man knelt down before Jesus, out of deep respect and said, "Good teacher, good rabbi, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

At first we might think the man was asking Jesus, what do I have to do to get into heaven? But the Biblical scholar, NT Wright, says the question was not so much about eternal heaven. Jews at that time expected God to bring a new age soon, to send a Messiah to defeat the Romans and begin God's reign, where everyone would live the way God created every person to live, loving God and all neighbors as the 10 Commandments outlined. Of course, this includes heaven after we die. But the man's question was more focused on how he could be part of the promised Age to Come, God's Kingdom reign, which he expected God to bring about soon.

Jesus noted that the man called him "Good Teacher." Was that flattery? Or did the man sense that Jesus might be God's Messiah who would bring about God's Kingdom in that generation? We don't know. In response, Jesus asked, "Why do you call me good. No one is good but God alone."

Then, as every rabbi would have done, Jesus asked the man how he was living the 10 Commandments. Interestingly, Jesus starts the list with numbers 6 through 9 (murder, adultery, theft, perjury) then he adds an extra one ('don't defraud') and then goes back to number 5, (honoring parents). Jesus omits commandments 1 through 4 (putting God first, no idols, not taking God's name in vain and the sabbath) and omits 10 (covetousness). Before the conversation ends however, Jesus will indirectly address all the commandments.

The sincere man responded to Jesus, "Teacher, I have kept all these commandments since my youth." I've done all the right things. I've been a good person.

Now Jesus has a choice. What will he say next? When Jesus was giving his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, he was clear that love required more than just a literal keeping of the external commandments. Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said... 'you shall not murder' and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgement.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool', you shall be liable to the hell of fire."

Jesus could have challenged the man's claim to have kept all the commandments by pointing out all the deeper ways the man had not always loved his neighbors. But instead Jesus paused for a moment and looked deeply at the man's face and heart. Mark then says, Jesus loved that man, pondering how best to respond to him. As usual, Jesus cut through all the superficial externals and went to the heart of the question the man was asking.

Today we might say that Jesus' response was like a courageous intervention, a love bold enough to confront an addict about an addiction he didn't think he had. Jesus spoke to the controlling source of the man's attitudes, priorities and actions. Out of love, Jesus 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 the man heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions."

This was not the response the man expected from Jesus. It touched a deeper place in his life than he had ever thought about. He left grieving, perhaps because he became aware in that moment of truth...that he did love his possessions addictively... more than he loved God and his neighbors. He was not fulfilling the commandments of God as well as he thought he was...and he was not prepared for God's coming Kingdom and reign.

I wonder what the grieving man was thinking as he walked home and looked around at his house and possessions? Do you think he might have changed his mind later, sold everything, giving the proceeds to the poor and come to follow Jesus?...or perhaps became more generous to others...or do you think he spent the rest of his life resenting what Jesus said to him? We don't know.

How would you respond today if Jesus said to you...go sell what you own and give the money to the poor and come follow me?" One natural instinct is to say, but Jesus, I have responsibilities, I have to be a good steward of the resources you have given me. If I give it all away, who will take care of my needs and my family's needs?

And that leads us to the point Jesus was making. Where do you and I put our deepest trust. Do we trust in our income, our possessions, our insurance, our pension, our investments, our physical and mental health as the most important sources of security and hope for our lives? Or is our deepest trust in God, even if everything else was taken away?

What tangible evidence is there that we really do love God and our neighbors, especially our poor and marginalized neighbors and our enemies, as much as we love as ourselves?

These are challenging questions for us, as they were for the man in today's gospel...and for the disciples of Jesus who were listening to this conversation.

After the rich man walked away, Jesus looked at his disciples and said, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God." He could see that his disciples were confused and didn't understand what he was saying. At that time, and even today, some

people think that having money and possessions and security was a sign of the good life, a sign that God was blessing the person. Jesus turned that perspective upside down.

Then Jesus used a humorous image to push home his point. "It is easier for a tall camel to go through the eye of a needle, which only a tiny piece of thread will fit through, than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." His bewildered disciples said, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them, with the same eyes of love he had as he looked at the rich man, and said: "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

Jesus was trying to say to his disciples the same thing he said to the rich man. No matter how hard we try, we human beings can't make ourselves as loving as God created us to be in our relationships with our God, neighbors and ourselves. It is not humanly possible. We only move in that direction as we continually ask for God's help and guidance, depending on Christ to live in and through us, making us what we cannot make ourselves, imperfect humans through whom the Spirit of Christ shines.

Then Peter spoke up. Remember, when Jesus called Peter and his disciples, he went to their workplace, where they were repairing their fishing nets by the Sea of Galilee. Jesus said, follow me. And amazingly, they left their nets and boats, left their possessions, their means of income and security, left their families and hometown and followed Jesus.

Yet they did not sell their boats, but left them to other family members to carry on the business, perhaps thinking if this time with Jesus didn't work out, they could return to their fishing business. So on one level they left everything to follow Jesus, but Peter might have wondered, are you expecting more from us, Jesus? Do we also have to sell our boats and give the money to the poor? What would that do to our families back home?

So Peter said, "Look, Jesus, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, I know. Everyone, like you, who is willing to make sacrifices to detach from possessions and the perks of this world so they can focus on loving me and neighbors in need will be rewarded...though there will also be challenges and struggles as a result of this decision...and in the age to come, you will experience God's Kingdom and eternal life. But remember, many people who are at the top of the ladder of success in this life will be at the bottom of the ladder in God's Kingdom and many who are at the bottom now, will be at the top of the ladder in God's Kingdom.

Throughout the Bible and the teaching of Jesus there is a constant thread of reminders that money and possessions are gifts of God to be shared with others in need. And money and possessions are a constant temptation to use them to make ourselves the priority...instead of placing our primary trust in God and asking God to guide us to use the money and possessions we have, by God's grace, to love and care for our neighbors in need...as we love and care for ourselves.

The early Christians took these words of Jesus about possessions very seriously. The Roman Empire at the time had a great divide between rich and poor with the vast majority

being poor. The rich constantly insulted the poor and refused to give the poor, including widows and orphans and abandoned children any help.

By contrast, while not every Christian sold everything and gave it to the poor, they all, very intentionally shared their possessions generously with each other and with the poor who lived around them, even though many Christians were also poor themselves. Historians have found that the tangible care Christians gave for their poor, sick, imprisoned and marginalized neighbors in Roman society motivated many people to want to become followers of Jesus, and eventually transformed Roman society from persecuting Christians to making Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire.

We could tell stories about Christians down through the centuries who heard today's Gospel and sensed that Jesus was calling them to live against the grain of their greedy, self-centered societies by living simpler lives so they could be more generous in loving their neighbors in need.

As you know, we as a parish are constantly responding to opportunities to give from our personal resources to help people who are struggling in our community and around the world in tangible ways, because we also want to embody the Jesus way of love for neighbors in our generation.

There is so much more we could ponder about these conversations Jesus had with the Rich young man and with his disciples and their implications for our lives. Yet, we need to stay focused on the point of today's Gospel: Jesus wants to challenge each of us this morning, as he challenged the young man and as he challenged his disciples.

Let's close our eyes and just be with Jesus for a few moments. ... be aware of Jesus right in front of you now, looking at you with eyes of love. After hearing today's Gospel, what changes might Jesus be inviting you and me to make in the way we think and live... so we can simplify our lives and find more tangible ways of making love for God and all our neighbors, especially the poor and most vulnerable, significant priorities in our use of time and money this week... and at this time in our lives? ...

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair hope, where there is darkness, light, where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.