

The 20th Sunday after Pentecost, proper 23. October 11, 2015. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Freeland. Mark 10:17-31 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

What a wonderful story in Mark today! So human! As with so many stories we're getting the bare bones here – Mark wants us to focus on the essentials, but in so doing we miss those little details that humanizes this picture.

When MLKjr gave his famous “I have a dream” speech on the Dc Mall he was going off-text – but it was easy for him to do that because what he said he'd said many times before in many different places. So it must have been with Jesus. It's pretty obvious that Jesus went back to places around the Sea of Galilee multiple times during his public ministry. There would have been many people who'd heard his peaching more than once, and who could recite some of the things he said, because he said them more than once. There's clear evidence elsewhere that some of those folk supported Jesus financially – folk whose names don't appear anywhere in the gospels. And they were almost certainly among that group who said to themselves “Good luck, Jesus, I'm with you in spirit, I can help you out, but I just can't drop everything right now and follow you - I have responsibilities.”

I think this “man [who] ran up and knelt before [Jesus]” was one of that group, that he was no stranger to Jesus. And his actions and words show him to be in a moment of crisis, of personal challenge; he wanted - really wanted - to be a faithful person. Have you ever found yourself in such a moment of challenge? You want to help; you want to be a part of the movement, the community, the group, but something's holding you back?

You can see this man's crisis in the very first thing he did: he threw himself at Jesus' feet. As we'll discover, he's a wealthy dude, so in an honor/shame culture this is self-debasement in spades! It's a personal statement that says “I don't care what people will think of me - this is too important not to act.” You know, with this first action I already like this man!

He wanted to know what he could do to advance God's kingdom; he wanted to support Jesus. So we should take Jesus' reply as good humored banter: when this devout man comes and calls Jesus “Good” the reproof is a gentle, humorous one: “Oh come on! Flattery will get you almost nowhere!”

Jesus recites the commandments, either directly or by reference, and the man responds with what was clearly an honest and humble statement: “I have kept these [commandments] since my youth.” Not only did no one contradict this, but, Mark says, that Jesus “looked at him and loved him.” Jesus is not recorded as responding this way to anyone else in the Gospels except God.

This is in many ways a sacred moment: a humble, devout, faithful person asking Jesus for guidance.

So what comes next is actually a shocker. “Just so,” says Jesus, “but for you....for you uniquely....this is not enough.”

The issue is not that this person was wealthy. It's okay to be wealthy. It's not that this man had possessions; it's that this man's possessions had him.

Pastor Jim Lindus likes to tell the story of one of his early trips to the Holy Land, before non-Muslims were excluded from the Dome of the Rock Mosque in Jerusalem. As the group were preparing to enter they were told to leave their shoes and their camera outside. The shoes were no problem, but many in the group hesitated with the cameras. Those of us who know about mosques know that you could leave a million dollars there and no one would take it. But these folk were so tied to their cameras they couldn't conceive of risking losing them. In the end, one of them said she'd forego seeing the Dome of the Rock and stay with the cameras! Think about that for a minute - surrender the unique spiritual opportunity to enter one of the three holiest places in Islam – a place holy, too, for Jews and Christians - because you're afraid your camera might be stolen! Somehow the priorities seem to be skewed!

If you don't get it, you're not alone! Jesus' disciples didn't get it either. "They were greatly astounded, and said to one another," 'what are we? Chopped liver? Haven't we given enough?'

Jesus' message is "if you have to ask that question you don't understand what I'm calling for" - a stewardship that recognizes that everything is a gift from God, and that what we have is to be used, first, for God's glory.

We have a beautiful place here! This church building – remarkable! Our other facilities - the envy of many churches, on and off this island. We are blessed. Our spiritual community - pretty amazing, despite our "warts."

Jesus' point is that if we can't let the physical stuff – the stuff we think we own – go, if we can't give up 'ownership rights' and accept that it all belongs to God, then we'll never really understand God's kingdom.

Many of us - and I include myself - are thinking right now "Sure! I could give this up if my eternal soul was on the line!" We just don't think that it is. Like the alcoholic who keeps saying, every day, "I'll quit tomorrow" we think (you and me) that we can take care of this 'ownership stuff' later; Jesus, on the other hand, says to us "now would be a good time.....!"

Jesus' directive, "give it all up" is a challenge, isn't it?! Like the wealthy man, that's a bridge too far for me, and, I suspect, for you.

Small steps. If not everything, what about 10% That's a tithe, and according to our church it's the minimum standard of giving – the place to start. For some that's too much. For others of us, it's not too much. My pledge for 2016 is \$10,000 - that's 11.36% of my income, before taxes.

That's appropriate – I'm in a position of leadership. If I can't set an example, why would anyone pledge? The expectation of the Episcopal Church – like, I discovered this week, the Presbyterian Church, the UMC, the Lutherans, and, I'm sure, all other denominations – is that any person in leadership must pledge, as an example of their commitment. And it would not be appropriate to

have a person making financial decisions about the money we give in common if they have no “skin” in the game – if they haven’t made a significant pledge to this congregation. And if 10% is too big a leap in one go then what about adding 1% or 2% to your pledge?

We give – that’s part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Today, we have a ministry fair. I was struck by the fact that we did not identify all the ministries within this congregation but that even with the ones we did identify we do not have enough space on the tables in Campbell Hall! That’s good – that’s a great reflection that many of you are actively involved in our congregation’s life, both inside and outside our walls. Ministry is giving. We’re called to do that: Time, Talent, Money - that’s who we are. My invitation to you, which is God’s invitation to you, is to embrace this vision, to enter into the richness of God, and give yourself fully to work for God’s kingdom.