

PENTECOST 21B: Mark 10:17-31 “Stewardship Begins at the Cross”

All of us have seen the devastation that Hurricane Michael brought to Florida and continued on its rampage up the East coast, to the Carolinas and even to Virginia. Our hearts, prayers, and resources go out to those who have suffered in this latest natural disaster. We, who have been given so much, can bring God’s blessing and relief to those who have lost everything. Some of you have perhaps had this experience due to storm, or fire, or flood, or unemployment, or financial loss. It’s impossible for the rest of us to know what it feels like to stand in the middle of a hurricane zone with nothing left but the clothes on your back and your memories. That is not the same experience as that which was faced by the rich man in our gospel. He was invited by Jesus to trade a lifestyle of consumption with a lifestyle of generosity.

The story of the rich man who was challenged by Jesus to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor, then invited to follow Jesus, is not my idea of a gospel that is comfortable to preach. I will try my best, and you will listen and nod in agreement, and we will all be hypocrites—two-faced—because you and I are not up to Jesus’ challenge. You and I will not go and sell all of our possessions, bring down our retirement and savings accounts, and leave our selves and our family vulnerable to financial ruin. We just won’t. Jesus must be speaking in hyperbole here; or this encounter must only have been intended for one rich man two thousand years ago. What do you think?

We’ve come to the fall season, the time of the harvest, and lessons that often speak of managing the resources that God has given us. Some members of congregations in the NC Synod wanted to stipulate in their call documents that the pastor would never preach about money! I wouldn’t accept one of those calls, and I certainly hope that no pastor would, because fully a third of Jesus’ sayings in the gospels deal with money and possessions. If you are going to preach the whole gospel, the preacher has to wrestle with all of Jesus’ words, including those about the resources that God has provided. That may make listeners uncomfortable, and the preacher too; but it’s well within the obligation and call of a pastor, even an interim pastor. So here goes.

But not quite yet! I’m going to begin at the end and then work my way backwards. It’s important to hear the context and then deal with the particulars. This whole episode began with the man’s question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“For God all things are possible.” That’s what Jesus said after his absurd simile of a camel going through the eye of a needle. Can’t be done! It’s impossible for people with wealth (like most of us) to get there, to get into the kingdom! Just can’t be done! We can’t pay our way in, we can’t do anything to warrant a place at the table. We’re powerless to control the end result or even the present situation. That’s when Jesus says, “For you it’s impossible, but not with God. For God all things are possible.”

The kingdom is a gift. As we have heard countless times, it is grace alone that affords us life in God’s presence now and forever. When we come to the point of death, none of what we have amassed in our retirement or saving accounts, none of our earthly possessions will mean a wit. The kingdom now, and in the life to come, comes purely through grace.

This is so because our Lord gave up everything he had, including his very life, in order to change the equation for us from death to life. Jesus said to the rich man, “Go and sell,” but

he also said, “come and follow me.” I wonder if Jesus intended to make this man his thirteenth disciple? If so, he with the other disciples were in for a rude awakening. Jesus and his entourage were headed for Jerusalem. We know what happened there. Previously Jesus had told his disciples that he would go to Jerusalem, there to suffer and die and rise again.

Pastor Robert Miles from the SC Synod said it well:

“God gave everything, and in the end God hung stripped and naked on a cross to name us and claim us and keep us always as God’s very own people. God gave everything, leaving even the folded grave clothes, so that we might know God lives. God went and sold all and gave it to the poor, to you and to me, poor in our privilege, confused by the commandments, lost in the midst of life, and helpless to pay the price of this impossible possibility.”

You and I are called by Jesus to be managers of the resources that God has given us, to be stewards. Stewardship begins here: God gave up everything for us. Because God did that through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God makes the impossible possible. God’s grace brings us the kingdom. Last week I said that trust is essential in human relationships. Today the message is that trust in God is essential for a life of generosity. So we ask in the words of the Prayer of the Day, “Lord, increase our faith, our trust, so that we might be faithful stewards.”

The rich man and Peter pose two contrasting responses to Jesus’ invitation to follow. Perhaps they represent those who found the early church’s communal sharing of gifts difficult to accept, and the faithful who shared everything they had with other believers. Jesus loved both men: the one who would and the one who would not accept his call. Mark tells us that Jesus looked on the rich man with love; and though Peter would deny Jesus, after the resurrection they were reconciled on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

The rich man was obviously successful at what he did. He knelt in reverence to Jesus, and called him “Good Teacher.” He had deep respect for this rabbi from Nazareth, and, like a good Jew, he followed the commandments. He led an exemplary life. But the condition that Jesus laid down for discipleship was too much to ask. He was caught up in the web of consumption and, sadly, for whatever reason, he could not adopt a lifestyle of generosity and sacrifice. I wonder, did he ever reconsider his choice after Jesus died and rose?

Peter voiced what the other disciples were thinking. These fishermen are often referred to as poor, but fishing in Galilee was a lucrative business. When Peter said, “We’ve left all to follow you,” he was being utterly truthful about the sacrifice. You can even hear the break in his voice. Have we considered what the disciples gave up: their possessions, their livelihood, a profitable family fishing business to follow Jesus to the cross and beyond to their own martyrdom?

Yes, Jesus promised them immense blessing, but it is not a promise of outright prosperity because Jesus referred to persecution as a gift. The blessing begins now as we assume God’s lifestyle, and comes to completion in the life to come. Is sacrifice truly a gift? Yes it is! Altering one’s lifestyle from consumption to generosity is an incredible and life-changing experience.

This fall our stewardship ministry team encourages you to consider what it means to be a manager of God's gifts. Our theme is the last line of a hymn we'll be singing each week as our Offering Song: "***And with your lives adore him who gave his life for all.***" Being a manager of God's gifts begins at the cross with the realization that God gave up everything for us. A steward then looks around at creation to affirm that everything that exists comes from God, including all we are and have. This leads us to prayer for greater trust in God's plan and purpose for us.

Then, and only then, do we take stock of what we presently offer to God through our Time, our Talents, and yes, financially, through our Treasure. Over the next several weeks we hope that the gospel will inspire you in this process of discernment. On Christ the King Sunday, November 25, you will be invited to offer your Time, Talent, and Treasure to the Lord. Making a commitment such as this is not something new for us. We do it when we buy a car and arrange a monthly car payment. We do it when we agree to a mortgage payment or buy an article on layaway. The difference is that the call to support ministry and the poor comes from our Lord, not a car dealer or a bank or a retail store.

It will be a joy to commit our Time, Talent, and Treasure, for the work of ministry through Muhlenberg; and this year especially, because we will soon consider a call to our primary candidate. This is an exciting time for us as we engage in the ministry that Christ has given us.

But first things first: Do not go and sell everything you have and give the money to the poor! Not just yet! For now, come and see your Lord and Savior on the cross! See what God has given up for you! Meet him here at the altar as the Risen Lord! Receive the blessing of his body and blood. How will God's generosity impact your life as a faithful steward?