

21st Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 23B)

Holy Family Episcopal Church,

Laurel Springs, NJ

Mark 10:17-31

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. AMEN

Our gospel reading this morning is the familiar parable of the rich young man or sometimes the rich young ruler. Upon encountering Jesus, the young man asks Him what he must do to receive eternal life. Jesus answers with the commandments, with the “**must not**s”:

-You **must not** kill

-You **must not** commit adultery

-You **must not** steal

-You **must not** bear false witness

-You **must not** defraud anyone, and finally,

-You **must** honor your father and mother.

The young man confirms that he has kept these commandments since his youth. Jesus tells him that in order to receive eternal life he must sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor so that he has treasure in Heaven, and then follow him. Regrettably, the rich young man simply cannot do it.

Biblical scholar William Barkley describes this as one of the most vivid stories in the gospels. We need to take note of how the man came and how Jesus met him. He came running- he flung himself at Jesus's feet. There is something amazing in the sight of this rich young aristocrat falling at the feet of the penniless prophet from Nazareth who was on the way to being an outlaw. "Good teacher!", he says. And immediately, Jesus answers back, "No flattery! Do not call me Good! Keep that word for God!" It seems as if Jesus is trying to pour cold water on the young man's enthusiasm. There are two things that are clear here. The first is that this man came to Jesus in a moment of overflowing emotion. It is also clear that Jesus held a personal fascination for him. Jesus did two things that every preacher and teacher should emulate.

First, Jesus said in effect, Stop and think! Do not get carried away by your excitement. Think calmly what you were doing. Jesus was not giving him the cold shoulder. He was telling him even at the very onset to count the cost of what he was saying. Then he said, "You cannot become a Christian by devotion to me. You must look at God." Jesus always knew and demonstrated that it was not about him. He knew he must never point to himself and that he must always point to God. Teachers and preachers are always only pointers to God.

This parable also emphasizes the essential Christian truth that respectability is not enough. Jesus quoted the commandments which were the basis of a decent life. Without hesitation the man says that he has always kept all of them. It should be noted that with one exception they were all negative Commandments, and that one exception operated only in the family circle. In fact, the man was saying, “I never in my life did anyone any harm.” And that is totally honest. But the real question is, “What good have you done?” Or more pointedly, “With all your possessions, with all your wealth, with all that you could give away, what positive good have you done to others?” Respectability overall consists in not doing things; Christianity consists in doing things. That is where this young man, like so many of us, fell short.

So, Jesus confronted him with a challenge. He told him to get out of this moral respectability. He told him to stop looking at goodness as consisting of not doing things. Take yourself and all that you have and spend everything on others. Then you will find true happiness. But he simply could not do it. He had great possessions which he had never considered giving away; and when it was suggested to him, he could not do it. It is true that he had never stolen and he had never defrauded anyone but neither had he ever been, nor could compel himself to be positively and sacrificially generous. It may be respectable never to take away from anyone, it is Christian to give to someone. That’s the big

difference. In reality, Jesus was confronting this man with a basic and essential question: **How much do you want real Christianity? Do you want it enough to give your possessions away?** And the man's action reflects his answer, "I want it, but not as much as all that."

Jesus tells those who have witnessed this interaction that it will be exceedingly difficult for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God and gives the example of a camel passing through the eye of a needle. Thank you, Betsy, for such an awesome picture on the bulletin cover this morning illustrating this point. It is impossible, it simply cannot be done. Yes, that is absolutely true. For us humans, it is impossible. but not for God. This is a huge point, a life verse. ***"For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."***

We can all picture that the rich young man who refused the challenge of Jesus, walking away sorrowfully, and, no doubt, the eyes of Jesus and the company of disciples, followed him until he was no longer visible in the distance. Then Jesus turned and looked at his own disciples and made this stunning statement. "How very difficult it is for someone who has money to enter the kingdom of God." The word used for money is **CHREMATA**, which is, translated as, "all those things of which the value is measured by coinage."

Maybe we wonder why this statement was so astonishing to the disciples. And it is stressed twice. The reason for the amazement was that Jesus was turning expected Jewish standards completely upside down. Popular Jewish morality was simple. It was believed that prosperity was the sign of a good man. If a man was rich, God must have honored and blessed him. Wealth was proof of excellence of character and favor with God. So, no wonder the disciples were surprised. They would have argued that the more prosperous person was, the more certain that they were of entry into the kingdom. So, Jesus repeated his statement in a slightly different way to make a clearer what he meant. “How difficult it is for those who have put their trust and riches to enter the kingdom.”

No one ever saw the dangers of prosperity and of material possessions more clearly than Jesus did. And what are these dangers?

1.) Material possessions tend to fix our hearts to this world. We have so large a stake in it, we have so great an interest in it, that it is difficult for us to think beyond it, and it is especially difficult for us to contemplate leaving it.

2.) If our main interest is in material things, we will think in terms of price and not in terms of value. We will think, in terms of what money can get. And we may lose sight of the fact that there are values in this world far beyond money, that there are things which have no price, and

that there are precious things that money cannot buy. We should never begin to think that everything worth having has monetary value.

I tend to think that Jesus would have said that possession of material goods is two things;

- It is an acid test of character. Prosperity can so very easily make people, arrogant, proud, self-satisfied, worldly, and believe that they are self-sufficient. It takes a really big and good person to bear it worthily.
- It is a responsibility. We will always be judged by two standards. One, how we got our possessions and two, how we used them. The more we have, the greater responsibility that rests upon us. Will we use what we have selfishly or generously? Will we use it as if we had undisputed possession of it, or remember that we hold it in trust from God?

The reaction of the disciples was that if what Jesus was saying was true, To be saved at all was almost impossible. Then Jesus stated the whole doctrine of salvation in a nutshell. He said, “If salvation depends on a person’s own efforts. It would be impossible for anyone. But salvation is the gift of God, and all things are possible to Him. Those who trust in themselves and in their possessions, can never be saved.

Those who, trust in the saving power and redeeming love of God can freely enter into salvation. This is the thought that Jesus stated. This is the thought that Paul wrote in letter after letter to the early church. And this is the thought which still for us is the very foundation of our Christian faith.