

Sermon Preached October 11, 2009
Year B, Proper 23
Mark 10:17-31
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
North Andover, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Wilson

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I'm going to read to you from an article I discovered in a psychology magazine a few years ago. – “‘Money can't buy me love,’ sang The Beatles, and they may have been right. Researchers say those who look for happiness in the almighty dollar may end up short-changed. ‘There's no one reason people acquire money, but where people get into trouble is when they try to get it to do things it can't do, such as character-building and self-esteem-building,’ explained study co-author Dr. Edwin A. Locke.

“The researchers were able to isolate 10 major reasons why people seek to make money, including: security, the ability to support a family, and to increase purchasing power, pride, leisure time and freedom. Respondents also wanted to be able to behave more impulsively and charitably, to ‘show off,’ and to overcome self-doubt.

“The researchers described these motivations as being a function of one of three things: a negative desire to socially compete and acquire power over others; a positive desire to meet life needs and achieve a measure of success; or a more-or-less neutral desire to have the freedom to do as one pleases--whether that be to shop until you drop or give it all away to a charity.

“It was those who sought money based on negative motives who seemed to have a lesser sense of well-being, according to the researchers. However, those dreaming of wealth based on positive motives neither harmed nor helped their sense of self worth. They conclude that while ‘money itself is not harmful,’ problems arise when wealth is used to fill voids such as self-doubt.”¹

Probably most of us could have figured this out, we’ve all heard the Beatles, but it’s interesting to hear it confirmed scientifically. It is also interesting to bear this study in mind when we hear the story of the rich man who has faithfully followed the Law of Moses all his life and now comes to Jesus to ask what else he must do. Jesus tells him to sell all he has and give it to the poor and then to come back and follow him.

¹ SOURCE: Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 2000;80:959-971. Thursday June 28, 2001. “Road to Happiness Not Paved with Money: Study” By Alan Mozes. NEW YORK (Reuters Health)

The man, understandably, is shocked. It's a big thing to ask of him. So big in fact that the man walks away from Jesus. He is being asked to transform himself, and by giving his money to the poor, to transform the community. But it's too much. He turns down Christ's invitation to follow him. Wow! Turns down Jesus over money! I like to think I would never have done that, but I'm not so sure. I too like my security. It's scary to let go of money and possessions.

The next section of the story may be a little confusing to us because when Jesus says it is hard for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God we learn the disciples are astounded. You see, in that culture it was assumed that being rich was a sign of God's favor. From their perspective rich people were closer to God than the poor. Then Jesus turns the story on its head and says the opposite, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." So they are thinking, "Wow, if even a rich person can't get into the Kingdom, what chance does any of us have?" That's when Jesus comforts them with the words, "For God all things are possible." In fact, the point is that the rich man can't earn his way into the Kingdom. There is nothing he can do, not even give away all his money. **Entrance into the Kingdom of God is not about what we do, but who we are. We are disciples of Christ.** The rich man was unwilling to transform, to become a disciple.

What is a disciple? I think sometimes we get hung up on thinking that Jesus' 12 Apostles are the only disciples, but a disciple of Jesus is anyone who follows him and shares his message. That means all of **us**. We are called to discipleship. We are called to be followers of Jesus. We are called to share his message. And we are to get rid of anything that stands in our way with that, including money and possessions to the extent that they are obstacles.

It's hard to summarize all the qualities of a disciple, but some of those found in scripture include qualities such as: good stewardship of all your resources (Matt 25:21 & 1 Cor 1-2), evangelism (Matthew 28:18-20), compassion and mercy (I Peter 3:8b-9, Romans 12:9-16, James 1:27; 2:13b; 3:13), participating in authentic community by loving one another (John 13:34), and devoting your life to Christ (Luke 14:26, Luke 14:27, Mark 8:3). In fact a summary of all of the above qualities is the word "transformation." As it says in Romans 12:2 "do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." Discipleship calls for transformation. Frankly, that's a pretty tall order. It requires a reorienting of our lives towards God. And we all will fall short some of the time. Fortunately perfection is not required. We are still disciples. We have chosen to follow Jesus.

Entrance into the Kingdom of God is not about what we do, but who we are. However, because of who we are, we will want to do the work of Christ.

Peter points out that they have all left everything to follow him, which is great and shows their devotion to Jesus, but they too also fall short! Someone once wrote a humorous letter as though a Management Company were writing to Jesus about positions in his organization. The letter reads:

“Dear Sir:

Thank you for submitting the resumes of the twelve men you have picked for managerial positions in your new organization. All of them have now taken our battery of tests; and we have not only run the results through our computer, but also arranged personal interviews for each of them with our psychologist and vocational aptitude consultant. The profiles of all tests are included, and you will want to study each of them carefully.

“As part of our service, we make some general comments for your guidance, much as an auditor will include some general statements. This is given as a result of staff consultation, and comes without any additional fee.

It is the staff opinion that most of your nominees are lacking in background, education and vocational aptitude for the type of enterprise you are undertaking. They do not have the team concept. We would recommend that you continue your search for persons of experience in managerial ability and proven capability.

“Simon Peter is emotionally unstable and given to fits of temper. Andrew has absolutely no qualities of leadership. The two brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, place personal interest above company loyalty. Thomas demonstrates a questioning attitude that would tend to undermine morale. We feel that it is our duty to tell you that Matthew had been blacklisted by the Greater Jerusalem Better Business Bureau; James, the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus definitely have radical leanings, and they both registered a high score on the manic-depressive scale.

“One of the candidates, however, shows great potential. He is a man of ability and resourcefulness, meets people well, has a keen business mind, and has contacts in high places. He is highly motivated, ambitious, and responsible. We recommend Judas Iscariot as your controller and right-hand man. All of the other profiles are self-explanatory. We wish you every success in your new venture. Sincerely, Jordan Management Consultants²

² <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/d/disciples.htm>

The disciples are transformed by Jesus, but this doesn't make them perfect. We too need not shy away from our call as disciples because we fall short.

The Diocese of Massachusetts has its mission statement on every document it sends out. It is four words: "Inviting, Forming, Sending, Serving." These are the calls of discipleship. We are invited into a relationship with Jesus Christ. We are formed into disciples through liturgy, sacraments, education, fellowship and love. We do not reserve our Christianity for the church, but are sent out to the world to share it with others. We serve the world both in and outside the church. "Inviting, Forming, Sending, Serving." This is who we are.

"For God all things are possible." When we become disciples of Jesus, when we answer the call, we might have to loose some things along the way. Like the rich man, we may be asked to give up some things very dear to us. But in the end it isn't about what we give up, it is about transforming ourselves into disciples, to follow where Jesus leads. And in that transformation we will find the Kingdom of God in this life. Right here and right now. Amen.