

Job 23: 1-9, 16-17
Hebrews 4: 12-16
Mark 10: 17-31
20 Pentecost, Proper 23

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“Inheriting Eternal Life”

Jesus would not have been successful as a financial planner. He would not have been successful as an economic advisor of any kind. And, I think it is abundantly clear that Jesus would have been singularly unsuccessful as a Presidential candidate. Imagine the buzz among the press and social media types had Jesus been on the stump running for President and had been asked by a potential voter about advice on leading a good life such that one might hope for heaven. Perhaps the asker was an ordinary sort or perhaps a wealthy entrepreneur from Silicon Valley or a hot-shot hedge fund manager one might read about in the news. Jesus reminds the questioner about the importance of obeying the laws. The questioner replies that, insofar as he knows, he has no criminal record and, therefore, has kept the laws of the land. So Jesus cheerfully says, “Well then, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” One can almost hear the deafening silence that followed that exchange.

We might be tempted to think that Jesus was offering a genial insult to this questioner but we are told, very carefully in the text, that Jesus loved him. This ruinous financial advice was offered in deep love for this person’s soul was at risk – in the eyes of Jesus – and needed a dramatic change to prevent his sinful end. We might also be reminded never to ask questions unless we are prepared for surprise answers.

Are we, like the disciples, perplexed at the words of Jesus, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God?” First, we might ask ourselves what it meant to have wealth or to be rich in ancient Palestine. No one had Social Security except in the form of sons. No one had Medicare. Wealthy people had land and people to work the land for them. Some wealthy people had gold, silver, and loans that paid interest. In ancient Palestine, being wealthy generally meant that one was an oppressor of others. And to accumulate vast wealth almost always meant that one had refused to perform the obligations imposed by Jewish law and custom regarding the care of the poor, the widows and orphans, and the needy.

Moreover, what does it mean to “enter the kingdom of God?” For much of Christian history, that phrase, “kingdom of God” was code for heaven so entering the kingdom of God was about getting into heaven so one could enjoy eternal life. But what about helping to create the kingdom of God right here on earth? Perhaps those who help bring the kingdom of God closer to fruition here on earth are the truly wealthy. Perhaps Jesus is making a distinction between wealth in only material things and true spiritual wealth.

Recently, the news was filled with a young man who bought the rights to an existing drug and promptly raised the price of the drug by 5000%. One might argue that smart and clever people make money in many ways or that this will stimulate competition for other drug companies to get into this market. We have seen the continual rise in compensation for chief executives – whether successful at their executing or not – even as most wages have stagnated or declined

when inflation is figured in. High end autos, large estates, private airplanes, enormous yachts – all these expensive toys are flying out the door. What must I do to inherit eternal life? I somehow don't think that question crosses the lips of those who are buying such items. And so, we might be tempted to argue that accumulating wealth and being a Christian are antithetical. But we would be wrong.

What we all need to remember is that it is all God's stuff in the first place. That wealthy man did not "own" anything. He was loaned that stuff and would, in the end, have to give it all back and then account for what he did with it while it was in his hands. Our being saved is about God's merciful grace. Our response to that grace and benefice is what matters. None of us earns anything totally by ourselves. All of us have been helped by others along the way. Sometimes that help comes in the form of individuals like our parents or grand-parents or older siblings or relatives who extend help. Sometimes that help comes in the form of complete strangers who offer help at a critical moment or who support organizations that help us. Sometimes, that help comes in the form of governmental programs that improve and change lives – consider the GI Bill, land grant universities, The Tennessee Valley Authority, Bonneville Dam, The Interstate Highway System – the list is long and remarkably impressive about how all of us have been helped by people we know and people we don't know. Our wealth is not our own; our wealth is not our possession; our wealth will pass from our hands sooner or later. I have never seen a hearse with a trailer hitch – you cannot take it with you. It is all God's stuff in the first place.

When we are unwilling to see our possessions as mere tools to accomplish truly worthy goals – building up our communities and our world so that all might live in peace and justice, we are trapped by our possessions. We never truly own what we have but what we have can sometimes own us. We think we are free when we mound up stuff all around us but in fact we end up walled in by things. It is when we have nothing that we understand what truly matters and who we truly are. Few of us would trade life for stuff. Yet we hang on to our stuff as if it provides life and health. We have been conned into thinking that we will be happier, more successful, and more popular if we have the latest thing.

What people tell me matters most are family, loved ones, friends, and cherished memories. When I listen to people offer eulogies about loved ones now deceased, I rarely hear mention of what the person owned. I always hear who that person was; how they related to others; how they gave of their time and themselves to others; how they made the world a better place for others. Wealth has more than one meaning.

The living word of God calls us to re-think what it means to be wealthy. It is not enough merely to follow the letter of the law when hatred and prejudice and envy and greed reside in our hearts. The living word of God calls us to remember that to be rich in possessions and things is a poor substitute if we are not first rich in love and caring. Our possessions cannot love us back for they are inanimate and incapable of true relationship.

That man thought he was wealthy because he had many possessions but, in reality, he was possessed and trapped and impoverished. But those who walk the Way of Jesus, those who understand that all things are gifts as all life is gift are not possessed at all. They are truly wealthy and rich in ways that cannot be lost or stolen or destroyed. The sum of our lives is never

really found in things or possessions; the true sum of our lives is almost always found in our efforts on behalf of others and in the relationships we have created and sustained.

If we would seek to receive mercy and grace in our time of need so we must all give mercy and grace in our day and in so doing, the last shall become first and the first last and both will rejoice in the goodness and greatness of God. Amen.