

“Getting Close to God”  
delivered Sunday, October 18, 2009  
by Rev. Agnes W. Norfleet, pastor  
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Mark 10:17-31

Reading a text like this the week before Stewardship Dedication Sunday, a preacher like myself can get downright giddy as the story unfolds. A lot of preachers read the whole passage as I have just done, but when they get to preaching they don't interpret it to the end, they stop at the 22<sup>nd</sup> verse. Seems the logical place to stop, doesn't it? Right at that dramatic moment in which Jesus asks the rich man to sell his possessions and give all his money to the poor, and the man walks away grieving because he has so much to hang on to. For a one-size-fits-all stewardship sermon, it ties neatly into a little package – give it all up for Jesus. Don't be like this man and find yourself walking away from Jesus and his love, feeling sorrowful and all, because if you put some big round numbers on your pledge card next week you'll be just fine.

Many a preacher have beat their congregations up with this story to try get the money flowing. I myself have done so more than once. But that simplistic stewardship approach – that goes after the money alone – is not being true to the meaning of the whole text. If you simply get caught up in the rich man who cannot part with his money, you miss the depth and breadth of what Jesus is after – not just for the rich man, but for the disciples, for all of us.

This go around – I kept pondering the story to the end - where Peter presses Jesus to elaborate a little more saying, “Lord, we have left everything and followed you.” Peter is speaking on behalf of the disciples saying, “What about us... what do WE need to do to inherit eternal life? We have already left our former lives behind.” Peter's question not only asks more information from Jesus, but it also pushes us to see that the story does not stop with the man walking away from Jesus' request to give all he has to the poor. Indeed, it actually ends with a promise from Jesus himself that those who have left everything behind will more than be rewarded, by a hundredfold with houses, family, and fields. He is talking metaphorically, of course, because no one needs a hundred houses or fields, but the image he uses shows that material wealth in and of itself is not the barrier between us and God. Rather, it is our attitude toward wealth. “As we accumulate riches, we are tempted to trust in our possessions and our powers of acquiring them, rather than in God for our ultimate security and comfort.” (1)

Jesus is obviously not suggesting a life void of all material goods for all people, nor is he giving a blanket prescription for what all human beings need to do in order to get closer to God. For this particular man, his wealth is in the way of being radically dependent on God. But for someone else it might be some other thing. As Martin Copenhaver has suggested, “Having wealth is only one way in which we can come to rely on ourselves and our own accomplishments. Other people might be asked to do something entirely different in order to learn to rely on God's grace. A professor of theology might be asked to throw away her books and give up her tenured post at a prestigious university. A man who consistently does good works might be required to take a year off and sit in the sun. The prescriptions may vary because there are many ways in which we can come to depend upon our own worthiness or accomplishments. Even voluntary poverty could be an obstacle if we came to view our poverty as the way to achieve salvation...” (2)

Salvation, a closer, lasting relationship with God, is what the rich man in our story is after, when he asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus response to him,

to Peter, and to us is: “The cost of eternal life is too high for you to accept: it is free.” There is nothing we can do to inherit eternal life. That would be more impossible than threading a camel through a needle. But there are things we can do to get closer to God. The first of which is always to accept the fact that life is a gift from God, and eternal life has been won for us by Jesus Christ. It is freely given. It is pure grace. In order to accept that gift we simply have to make room for it. We have to let go of the things to which we cling so tightly so that our hands and our hearts can receive it.

What are the things that get between you and God? What in your life is so full to the brim that there is no more room for God? Where is the emptiness in your life that only the Spirit can fill? These are the questions the rich man and Peter ask on our behalf. And, these are the questions of Stewardship season because making a commitment to the church is to invest in the celebration that life is a gift from God. To invest in the church is to invest in the one community that is always and ever about helping people get closer to God.

My friend, K.C. Ptomey, retired a year ago from Westminster Presbyterian Church in Nashville, after a long and distinguished career. In his last Stewardship season there, with the wisdom of 41 years in ministry behind him, and no more slick stewardship slogans up his sleeve, he said something to his congregation many of you already know to be true. After 41 annual pledge efforts, and more than a few capital campaigns, K.C. said, “I’ve seen everything... house-to-house calls, letters, telephone campaigns, challenges to tithe, banners, posters, fancy stationery, charts, graphs, movies, slides, skits, Bible studies, suppers, lunches, breakfasts, desserts, efforts to share, efforts to impart guilt, promises of eternal bliss, threats of hell-fire and damnation. I’ve seen it all. I’ve done it all...” K.C. said. But what a lifetime of ministry had finally taught him is that generosity simply comes out of people who have experienced the grace and goodness from God, which is always out of proportion to what we deserve.

“Awareness,” he told his congregation last fall, “deep awareness, of the abundant and undeserved goodness of God, is the only thing I know of that can elicit abounding generosity. Guilt won’t do it. Slick stewardship messages won’t do it. Shame won’t do it. Charts won’t do it. Letters won’t do it. Sermons won’t do it. But awareness, deep awareness, of the abundant and undeserved goodness of God – that will do it. Drive down the street on a fall day and feast your eyes on the colors. That’ll do it. Hold your newborn child or grandchild in your arms and feel those tiny fingers wrap around your thumb. That’ll do it. Listen to the doctor who, after long hours of surgery, reports that your loved one is going to be okay. That’ll do it. Look in the face of someone you love, and see a joyful smile. That’ll do it. Stand in this place any Sunday joining your voice with others, singing of God’s tenderness. God’s forgiveness. God’s love. God’s care. That’ll do it. Look around you at the faces of those with whom you worship this morning. Linger over one or two who have been an important part of your life, who have loved you, encouraged you, inspired you, forgiven you. That’ll do it. Be aware. Allow yourself fully to appreciate the abundance that is yours, and your generosity will overflow.” (3)

My friends, as you prayerfully consider your financial commitment to Shandon in preparation for Stewardship Dedication next Sunday, remember the rich man. He could not let go of his attachment to material wealth in order to open himself up to the life Jesus offered him.

Remember the camel. It cannot be threaded through a needle any more than we can earn our own salvation. The price is too high for us to achieve on our own. It is a free gift from Jesus Christ.

Remember Peter and the disciples. Having dropped everything to follow Jesus they could not figure out what else they could do to earn their place right up close to God. What they could

not see was they were already there, because God had come close to them in the company of Jesus Christ.

But above all else, remember your own life with deep awareness of all that God has done for you in this life – and in the life to come. Draw closer to God in thanksgiving and praise, and your generosity will follow for you, for Shandon, for God. AMEN.

#### NOTES

- 1) Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 4, p. 166.
- 2) Martin Copenhaver, "The Cost of Eternal Life," *The Christian Century*, Sept. 21-28, 1994, p. 849.
- 3) K.C. Ptomey, Homily preached at Westminster, Nashville, 10/12/08.