

In the Name of the Living God. Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's gospel passage from Mark is often seen as a good launching point for Stewardship Sunday. On its surface level, Jesus tells the man...who apparently had some wealth...to sell everything, give the money to the poor, and follow me. In that vein, some preachers like to focus on this passage from Mark out of a challenge to each one of us about our relationship with our money...but we will look further and deeper.

Some of us know this as the story of the rich young ruler, although Mark is the only one who suggests he is rich, Matthew is the only one who says he is young, and Luke is the only one who calls him a ruler. Whatever. He is eager, runs up to Jesus as he starts out on his journey to Jerusalem.

Eager. Runs up, asking, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Are you kidding? What a weirdo! I mean, you can see the strangeness in this, right? It would be news enough to almost make the paper today...better yet, a social media wildfire.

Here is a guy who has it all together, by every measure of then, and probably today. Rich, or young, or ruler...whichever it is...let's face it: these are all descriptors of success. At least, it is not poor, or old, or slave. Let us realize that the term "rich" at that period of time was not far off from what we know, here and now. You and I are rich as well. These are not the slums of India, or cardboard, three wall shacks of Central America that we live in.

You are not rich? You turned on your heat. Had electricity at your command this morning. Flushed toilets. Had breakfast. Wear clean clothes, not rags. We put gas in our cars, or board a plane to run off to see grandchildren when the mood strikes. We have family who love us, or at least tolerate us. Have relatively good health, all things considered. That is this man. Not Ismail, but rather John or Jane Doe of 2018 America. OK, so what?

What makes him so weird is that he seems to really have it all together...in both worlds. Not only with the bank account, loving wife, good job or business...but in their conversation, Jesus says that he knows the man knows the commandments. Jesus lists several, and the man responds that he has kept all of the commandments since his youth.

Read between the lines of that. This guy prays...on the side, on his own, in the privacy of his home. A bigger shock to us is that he takes time for it, let alone does it. Takes the time, and then goes to services..every one, even the extras added to the calendar. Studies scripture daily. Probably goes to Bible study...whoa! Does all the little things commanded here and there. Knows them inside out...and lives according to them. All of them.

The thing is this. He runs up to Jesus, drops to his knees, and looks up.

Looks at Jesus, right square in the eyes...with the eye and presence of truthfulness and

sincerity. He has nothing to hide. No guilt. No regret. Unafraid before this man of God.

Who of us would be comfortable doing this? Look Jesus square in the eye, and say, “I know the laws and the commandments, and I have kept them faithfully. Done everything expected and asked of me. So, what else must I do to receive what is mine?”

The key word in his question is “inherit”. Inherit eternal life. In the Jewish tradition, eternal life was a given, something one inherited by being born right. An entitlement for being Jewish. In other words, it is my right...so now, how do I claim that right?

The gospel says that Jesus looked at him, and loved him. Loved this complete stranger.

Why do you suppose that is in there? Who here wonders about that...why Jesus loved this stranger before him?

It is that Jesus saw the man’s genuine eagerness? His hunger for the answer? His diligent search? His great respect for Jesus, as well as his interest in the eternal?

Jesus loves this man because he can tell he is serious about it. He is ripe. He is ready for God. He has come to the end of what he can do for himself, to the end of what money can do for him, and to the end of what the law can do for him.

He would make an excellent disciple, but he lacked one thing....and that was that he cannot have it all. He will have to choose: this world, or the next. To have eternal life, he will have to give up what he values most of all in this world; and then he will be free to seek eternal life and follow Jesus.

What does he value most in the world? The same for you and for me.

One word: Control.

This man learned what many do when Jesus says, “Follow me”. This story focuses on money, but the money is only symbolic, an icon. The man..and many others...feel the tug, the pull, of all the things that they love more than him. The idea of following Jesus is one thing, but the doing is another thing altogether. Even more than this man, we tend to look at what we must leave behind, rather than looking at the riches we will gain. It is hard business...but it is the business of the deepest foundation of faith. The disciples heard all this and, no different from our reaction, they are despondent, asking “Then who can be saved?”

The demand of Jesus seems impossible, far more demanding than the law and the prophets. According to the law, a rich person was entitled to his riches as long as he shared a certain percentage of his wealth, his fields and grain, with the poor. And now Jesus is saying, ‘Much more is required of you.’ He is saying, instead, ‘I want all of you,’ and ‘You cannot serve two masters at the same time.’

He is incapable of letting go. It is just not in him. It is just not in him. And that is the point.

The disciples despair in saying, “Then, who can be saved?” Their voice is the voice of our

own hearts when we come to that line, that place of decision. So often, we see the great difference between us and Jesus, and so we feel like Peter when he began to sink after a few happy steps on the water. As the reply was for Peter, so it is for us. "For you, it is impossible, but not for God. For God, all things are possible."

Are we here capable of letting go? Have any here allowed God the task, the job, of fitting us through the eye of that needle?

God lives, alright. God lives in the revelation within one's life's journey. Six years ago with this passage, I had an earlier understanding. We tend to think Jesus is telling the man that he must become poor. That it is all about possession, because disposing of his possessions are what is directly commanded. But, in truth, the opposite of rich is not poor. The opposite of rich is.... free. Leaving the past behind.

But now, six years later, God's revelation in these words comes more alive in this way: Jesus loved the man, this stranger who approaches him directly. Yet, in that love, Jesus still tells him what will happen. Jesus knew this man could not...not would not...but he could not give of himself. I feel as though I now know the heart of Jesus in this way...how it mourns, how it is broken for those who he comes to know and love, and yet he also knows they are what...Doomed?...because God the Father did not bring them to him. Because they try to do it all on their own...with meetings, and schedules, and distractions, and the business of life that people use to avoid the whole mess, but instead really waste their time and lives thinking that they are doing the holy thing.

No wonder Jesus is the man of sorrows. The man of pain and grief. But it was not for himself. No, it was for this "rich" man...rich like us in every way we know, but poor like us in the deepest, most sorrowful way. Which is being alone, apart from God, at needle time.

Except there was this small group who did otherwise. Two of them left their fishing nets behind. Two more of them a fishing boat and their father as well. Another one pushed away from his tax collector desk to follow the strange man with the burning eyes. All of them walked away from something. Not because they had to in order to become a disciple, but because they wanted to.

They wanted to. Not because it was Sunday morning, and you are **supposed** to. He called, they followed, and stuff got left behind..because, first and foremost, they **wanted** to. Stuff got left behind, or not done anymore...not because it was bad, but because it was in the way. He called, and nothing else seemed all that important anymore...because God put it in their hearts.

Pray that God the Father allows you to see and completely understand the fullness of the alternative offered to us by God. To take the freedom that comes to us from the grace of God by following the example of Jesus in letting go of what keeps us away from God, all in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.