

**Trinity Episcopal Church**  
Lawrence, Kansas  
Sermon for October 11, 2009  
Proper 23b ~ Mark 10:17-31  
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

I've reached that stage of life when many of the things I remember are unfamiliar with many of the people I know because they weren't there. The Jack Benny Program is one of those memories. A classic exchange of dialogue used repeatedly through the years on Mr. Benny's radio and TV programs was that of a holdup man approaching Mr. Benny and demanding, "Your money or your life." After a long pause, Jack Benny would always plead, "I'm thinking...I'm thinking!"

Jesus put a similar choice before a rich young man who came running up to him looking for eternal life. For a preacher who would like to preach a "painless" stewardship sermon, this is a difficult passage of scripture. There is no way we can pretend it isn't in the Gospel. Its authenticity and importance is verified by the fact that it appears in all 3 synoptic Gospels. All three accounts begin with a man asking Jesus what more he must do to be saved or have eternal life. Matthew identifies the man as *young*. Mark tells us he is *rich* or has many possessions. Luke describes him as a *ruler*. Thus we have come to call this the story of the *rich young ruler*. The radical demands of discipleship presented by Jesus in this encounter must have made an enormous impression on those early followers and on the young church as it sought to deliver the Christian message in a hostile and troubled world. What can we learn from the encounter that will be of value to us?

We're talking about eternal life but what is that anyway? Is it "pie in the sky bye and bye when I die?" I suppose you could say that. But there is much more to it. Eternal life is not a geographical location but a state of being, an experience with God in the life of God. In the New Testament, eternal life is also known as everlasting life, abundant life, the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, or simply as the Kingdom. It is the central theme of Jesus message and everyone is invited to share in this life.

**Eternal life comes as a gift from God!** This man asked for direction. He asked the right question, but he did not realize whom he was asking. He refers to Jesus as "good teacher." Jesus responded by saying that only God is good. He rebuffed the man's efforts to find eternal life by learning it from a "good man." Jesus refused to be his guru! While a certain kind of wisdom can be learned from a wise teacher, eternal life comes only as a gift from God. We can't save ourselves. If we could, we would have no need of a savior and you wouldn't be spending your time listening to this sermon. The man wanted another acquisition to add to his collection and he was approaching it in the wrong way. His intentions and his way of life were obstacles.

**Eternal life is not the same thing as respectability.** Jesus was dealing with a very respectable man. In Luke's gospel, he is referred to as a "ruler." When Jesus reminded him of the Law of Moses by recalling some of the things we are not supposed to do, the man told him he'd always practiced this kind of respectability. He never did anyone any harm. And, it would seem that Jesus accepted his statement as true. But the real question here is, "Okay, so you have met all the requirements for respectability. What good have you done?" With all your possessions, with all that you could share with others in need, what positive good have you done? How much have you gone out of your way

to help and comfort and strengthen others as you might have done - in light of your ability and in contrast to how you have taken care of your own needs?

Respectability consists mainly in *not* doing certain things. While that is commendable and necessary, it does not validate anybody's moral fibre - it only renders one respectable and, perhaps, benign. The true validation of our moral fibre is in the good we do out of our wealth - in whatever terms you measure it - so that it does *not* become an obstacle that interferes with the relationship with God and our neighbors. Because, it is in those relationships that eternal life is to be discovered and experienced. If we are slaves to material things, if we are possessed by our possessions, we will not be free to experience eternal life.

Jesus did not die for respectability! You and I know how to be respectable. Jesus died to free us from things that bind us and separate us from life eternal. I once saw a sign on a school marquee: "Being important is nice, but being nice is important." I don't have any quarrel with that. However, Christians have to be careful not to confuse niceness with Christianity. Eternal life is not the same thing as respectability.

**Eternal life involves a radical choice.** And the man who knelt before Jesus was not ready to make it. When Jesus forced him to stop and think about it, he drove the point home by telling him that the surest sign of his true desire to have eternal life would be to sell all his possessions, give the money to the poor, and then come and follow Jesus. The man sadly realized that he wasn't really all that interested. He loved his comfortable respectable existence more than he wanted to follow the way to eternal life. His possessions were all that stood in the way, but he enjoyed them, was *defined* by them, too much to part with them.

Was the man so different from most of us? Whether it is possessions or some other type of worldly security, for most of us there are other loyalties, other dependencies, that stand between us and our Lord. Following Christ demands a radical decision to let go of anything or anyone to which we are more attached than him. This is necessary because divided loyalties do not promote growth of the human spirit. Yet, we are assured by Jesus that when we decide to enthrone him in our lives, all the rest falls into perspective, a new perspective, a perspective we can really live with, a perspective determined not by things on the outside of us, but by the presence of God within us.

Jesus never says it is wrong to possess wealth. This is not a story about the virtue of poverty or the evils of riches. It is a story about the source of meaning and purpose and identity in our lives. Do I define myself and assign meaning to my life according to the material world, or does my identity and my meaning come from God, speaking to my inner being. Do I trust and cling to things as if they were my deities, or do I trust and cling to God in a way that liberates me from bondage to things? Tithing and giving is a spiritual discipline that acknowledges and helps us remember that everything we have, whether spent, saved, or given away, is a sacred trust from God. We are the only creatures entrusted with that knowledge. We are not the owners of God's bounty but the creatures God has appointed as stewards of it. What a blessing! What liberating knowledge that is! What a contrast to the situation of the rich young ruler, who was possessed by his possessions.

Jesus, Mark tells us, said what he said to the man because he loved him. By today's standards of pastoral care, most of you would be shocked if I said something like that to you. You would find it

hard to believe I said it because I love you. You'd prefer that I soft-peddle it a bit and help you simply be a bit more comfortable with your possessions. Relieve a little of your guilt. Accept excuses. Assure you that you can have your cake and eat it too. Are you really so fragile? Do you really need my protection? Is Jesus' so powerless as to not be able to make us into the kind of disciples he demands? I fail the gospel if I don't love you enough to tell you the truth, eternal life involves a radical choice. It is as hard for any one of us rich people to get into the kingdom of God as it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle - really. "Who then can be saved?" Mortals cannot save themselves. Only God can do that. By his grace, we can make the radical decision to be possessed by God alone.

**Eternal life is not a private affair.** After the encounter with the man, Jesus sat down and talked with his disciples about it. They'd made the decision, felt something great happening in them because of Jesus, but still were far from finished with the process of maturing in their faith - just like you and just like me. But they sat together and together they worked out their salvation. That's a part of the texture of human life and the genius of the way of discipleship - eternal life is meant to be shared. By the design of the Creator, the Christian life doesn't exist apart from the community of faith. God can and does work outside the Church, but when God calls people, one essential aspect of this calling is to be a part of the redemptive community. It is there that the finest opportunities for growth and worship and service are to be found. As the love of God is manifested in our lives and in the life of the community of faith, it quite naturally becomes tangible in the world.

My Christian sisters and brothers are a valuable part of my Christian life. The community we share matters to me, to you, and to the message of the kingdom of God. That's why we come together and engage in ministries to each other and to the world at our doorstep. Each member of the community is responsible for sustaining the life of the community. Because of that, there is no reason why this congregation should have a financial problem. None. There is no excuse for this parish to have a deficit. None. By the time you call your new rector, there should be evidence everywhere that you are a people of "glad and generous hearts." Your new rector should never have to hear the excuse, "we can't afford it." If there is one thing that needs to be resolved during this year of transition, it is the matter of money! Wherever there is a financial problem in a community of Christians, there is almost always a spiritual problem that needs to be addressed. When the spiritual problem is addressed, the so-called financial problem usually evaporates.

So, the invitation to eternal life is extended afresh today. It is an invitation during the coming week as you prepare to make a new commitment of financial stewardship to take time for some self-examination to see if there is a spiritual condition that you need to address. It is an invitation to receive God's greatest gift, for eternal life IS the very life of God. The invitation is to live beyond obstacles such as respectability and wealth. And, the invitation is to full participation in the community of those who are growing in grace and in the knowledge and love of God.