

## Mark 10:17-31

<sup>17</sup>As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>18</sup>Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. <sup>19</sup>You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” <sup>20</sup>He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” <sup>21</sup>Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” <sup>22</sup>When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

<sup>23</sup>Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” <sup>24</sup>And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup>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.” <sup>26</sup>They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” <sup>27</sup>Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

<sup>28</sup>Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” <sup>29</sup>Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, <sup>30</sup>who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. <sup>31</sup>But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

I imagine that there are preachers across the country who have chosen to preach today on the lectionary passage from Job, or perhaps the reading from Hebrews, or even the Psalm from this morning's lectionary rather than look at this story of Jesus' interaction with what we traditionally call today, the Rich Young Ruler. You see, this is the kind of story that makes us squirm a bit in our seats. We don't like to talk about this story for the same reason we get uncomfortable during Stewardship season – money is a tough topic. Asking for money is usually difficult, and when we have to do it we often either want to apologize for having to do it, or provide ample illustrations to show why giving more money is urgently needed for the task at hand. In this story, Jesus does neither.

This reading is quite timely for us today, as, in a few more minutes in our called congregational meeting, you will be presented the budget for 2010, which requires an increase in our giving in order to make the ends meet. Don't worry - the Stewardship and Finance committee is not asking you to sell all of your possessions and give the money to the church. But Jesus does ask this of the Rich Young Ruler, and without apology or even explanation for why this is a necessary thing for him to do. This is one of the Biblical messages that we tend to want to tone down, to explain how Jesus didn't really mean it in the extreme way it sounds, or how Jesus couldn't possibly have that expectation, of the Rich Young Ruler or anyone else. But we are confronted today with this story where Jesus does ask for everything, and we have to reckon with it if we are to study seriously the Word of God.

Jesus has an encounter with a man who is rich. Matthew calls him Young. The Gospel of Luke calls him a ruler. We know him as the Rich Young Ruler, but Mark just calls him a Man. A Man comes to Jesus and kneels before him and asks what can he do to inherit eternal life.

You know the story. The man is probably happy with his life as it is and wants to add to it the good feeling that his life will continue to be good. He's also kept the commandments and seemingly has avoided hurting people.

It would look like he has loved God and loved his neighbor on paper. But Jesus instead of saying well done, he says sell all you own and give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven, then come, follow me. The man is just asking what he can do so that he can be accepted. He never expected that Jesus would tell him to give up everything. But Jesus did.

What if you had been the one who personally asked Jesus what they needed to do to have eternal life and be a Christian and Jesus said to you "Sell everything you have and give it to the poor"? What would you do?

The man had "great possessions", but so do we when compared to the vast majority of the rest of the world. Even in hard economic times we have more than we need. Jesus tells him that the way to eternal life leads through discipleship. He asks him to be a disciple. Jesus had plenty of disciples standing around who had given up everything to follow him; and as you read through the gospel of Mark, you see very clearly that their journey had not been easy.

And now this man hearing how much it costs to be a disciple dejectedly turns and slowly walks away. There are lots of times in gospels when Jesus asks someone to be a disciple, and this is the only one I know of where Jesus is turned down. And the reason is money.

Can we identify with this man a little bit? We all know how easy it can be to be tied to our material possessions, how time consuming they are when they need repair. "Concern for our stuff tends to chain us to our stuff." We've also experienced in different ways how risky a life of discipleship can be. Can we blame him for walking away?

Today we don't really like to talk about discipleship in these terms. We've probably talked said so little about the cost of discipleship that we make it seem easy and unbelief seem silly.

**William Willimon tells the one about the evangelist who, after preaching a long sermon, gave an altar call. "Come to the altar and give your life to Christ!" he said. Nobody came.**

**In frustration, the evangelist said, "Come to the altar, as a way of saying that you love and honor God." Still nobody came.**

**In even greater frustration, the evangelist appealed to the congregation, "Come to the altar as a way of saying that you want to live a better life." Nobody came.**

**Finally, "Look, if you love your mother, come down to the altar. Okay?"**

Obviously that's not a call to discipleship. Sometimes we just make it sound like it's easy. We ask people to take on leadership roles and promise it won't disrupt their schedule. Discipleship is following Jesus, it's hard, and if we find ourselves thinking it's easy, we aren't doing it right. There are perfectly good reasons for turning away from the call to discipleship. If one chooses discipleship, they have a lot of work to do.

We've all thought about the tremendous cost of discipleship in which we give up our lives with all the particularities that we hold important, so that we live the life of a Christian as the hands of Christ. But maybe we get too focused on what we're giving up and not what we're gaining.

One night, in a college dormitory Bible study William Willimon presented this same story of Jesus and the rich man. He asked the gathered students, "What do you make of this story?"

"Had Jesus ever met this man before?" asked one of the students?

"Why do you ask?" he asked.

"Because Jesus seems to have lots of faith in him. He demands something risky, radical of him. I wonder if Jesus knew this man had a gift for risky, radical response. In my experience, a

professor only demands the best from students that the professor thinks are the smartest, best students. I wonder what there was about this man that made Jesus have so much faith he could really be a disciple."

Another student said thoughtfully, "I wish Jesus would ask something like this of me. My parents totally control my life just because they are paying all my bills. And I complain about them calling the shots, but I am so tied to all this stuff I don't think I could ever break free. But maybe Jesus thinks otherwise."

Well, Willimon was astounded. What he had heard as severe, demanding BAD news, these students heard as gracious, GOOD news. After all, it even says in the scripture text that Jesus when Jesus asked the man to give it all up to follow him, he first looked at the man and loved him. What appears to be a harsh command to deprive ourselves is actually an invitation to be free. Jesus invites people to be his disciples.

In *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis has an illustration that speaks to this kind of bondage and freedom. A character has a noisy lizard-like creature on his shoulder, and the noise it creates is not only a nuisance, but a source of great embarrassment. Then an angel approaches and offers to kill the creature, saying it is the only way to silence it. The main character resists, hems, and haws, and doesn't really want it dead. He knows that killing the creature will be painful for him, even if it will free him of this great burden. Finally he gives in, and the angel kills the creature. The pain knocks the main character to the ground. Then there is a surprising transformation – the lizard becomes a beautiful strong, white stallion, and the character grows to become a man of great stature who rides the stallion into heaven. Before, the character was dependent on the lizard-like creature, but once that dependency was broken, he was freed and transformed in ways that he couldn't have imagined. Our dependency on our possessions can be like this, too; we are very hesitant to break this dependency, but we find that our lives can be transformed once we do. And just as the lizard creature turned into a strong stallion, we can also see that our possessions and wealth are not evil in and of themselves, but when we are no longer dependent on them – when they no longer own us – they can also be transformed to be instruments of God's grace in the world.

Jesus' invitation of discipleship remains fresh for us today. It is hard to live a faithful life of discipleship when we have so much. It's hard to find the time to take care of the things we do have. The house always needs more work doesn't it? So, pray about you're your life and see how you can listen to Jesus. Divest! Break free! Let go of your stuff! Jesus says, Follow me! Jesus says, I believe you can do it!