



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

October 11, 2009

Proper 23B

By the Reverend Donna Barr

Dr. Peter Barnes tells a story that in 1520, Hernando Cortez and his soldiers were leaving what is now Mexico City, laden down with gold stolen from the Aztec Indians. Cortez reminded his men "Don't take too much, for he who travels safest travels lightest." But his soldiers did not listen, and they stuffed their pockets full of gold. Then came a part of the journey where the soldiers had to swim from the end of a bridge to the shore. A number of them drowned because they would not give up hold on those riches.

How many of us are in that situation this day? How many of us here today are holding on tightly to things that are dragging us down, and that are preventing us from following the Lord? Many years ago, Jesus had a close encounter with a wealthy young man. The conversation between the two of them reveals a great deal about the problem of possessions and the need to be willing to give up that which keeps us from following Christ. As we consider these things today, I want you to notice three things: 1. the question of the young man; 2. the response of Jesus; and 3. the reaction of the disciples.

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The Question of the Young Man

A quick glance at the young man who came to Jesus tells me that he was a person worthy of our respect. He greeted our Lord with abundant courtesy. He ran and knelt before Jesus and called Him, "Good teacher." His interest in spiritual things must also be commended. He came running to Jesus enthusiastic in his pursuit of spiritual help. He was so anxious to secure "eternal life" that he could not wait for a private conversation. We should also note that he was a man of moral action. When Jesus began to remind him of the commandments, he replied, *"...all these I have kept since I was a boy."* In many ways, he was like you and me. His life was visibly pure. He did all the right things, and said all the right words. When Jesus said, "Do not commit adultery," he could sincerely say that he had been chaste. To the Lord's command, "Do not steal," he could say that he was honest in business. He always respected his parents. He had not slandered anyone. He was an out-and-out good guy! Verse 22 tells us that the young man had many possessions. And when we look at the parallel accounts of the incident in the other synoptic gospels, we find that Luke tells us the man was a ruler, a person of significant influence. And Matthew says he was a young man which makes his accomplishments all the more impressive. When this young man ran up to Jesus, there was one question that was weighing upon his mind and heart. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" What a

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profound question. It is the most important question you or I could ever ask. What did Jesus have to say in answer to that question? What was his response?

II. The Response of Jesus

I would have thought that Jesus might be pleased with this young man's enthusiasm....his longing for spiritual truth....his faithfulness in keeping the commandments! The irony is that Jesus handled the situation in a manner that is precisely the opposite of how I would have done it. Jesus began with a rebuke -- "Why do you call me good? There is none good but God." But the closer we look at the rich young ruler, the more it becomes evident that there was something standing between this young man and his desire to inherit eternal life. He was a man of great wealth, and when Jesus told him that he lacked one thing, that he must go and sell everything that he had and follow Christ, the story tells us that he went away sad. The tragic decision to turn away reflected a greater love for possessions than eternal life. Jesus saw more clearly into this man's heart than I could have, and the gospel tells us that Jesus looked at him and loved Him. It was love that prompted Christ to say the hard words, and he put his finger on the sensitive spot in the man's heart that needed to be touched most. The man's wealth and all it meant to him with regard to position, status, comfort and security

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prevented him from gaining eternal life that day. As the rich young ruler walked away, Jesus said to His disciples, *"How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a man to enter the Kingdom of God."* The New Testament consistently warns of the dangers of wealth. The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: *"People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil"*.

Riches can give us a false sense of security. The moment we begin to think we've got it made, we need only to look at our recent stock market fall and job losses to understand that we are never completely secure. It only takes an illness, a hurricane, or an unexpected accident to show us just how foolish this kind of thinking really is.

Riches can build in us pride and a feeling that we are better than other people. Money can cause us to develop an inflated sense of self-worth, and we begin to think we're something special when in actuality we are just sinful people who struggle with greed and the desire for more.

Riches can lead us to depend on ourselves rather than God. We begin to think it's up to us to succeed, and we accept too much of the blame and take too much of the credit, depending on whether things are going poorly or well.

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And finally, riches can lead to a greed that wants to possess rather than an open-handed generosity. We begin to hoard, we become selfish, and we fail to have the carefree attitude that Christ calls us to with respect to possessions.

The final point to this gospel is to look at the reaction of Jesus' disciples to his teaching and how it impacts us as his followers.

III. The Reaction of the Disciples

When Christ talked about the difficulty that a rich person has with entering the Kingdom of God, the disciples were amazed and asked, *"Who, then, can be saved?"* William Barclay and others have said that to understand this saying of Jesus, we need to see it in the context of Judaism. The reason for the disciples' amazement was that Jesus turned accepted Jewish standards completely upside down. Popular Jewish belief was that prosperity was the sign that an individual was a good person. If he/she was rich, God must have honored and blessed the individual. Wealth was a proof of favor with God. They would have argued that the more prosperous a person was, the more certain were their entry into heaven. In contrast to all this, Christ said in the analogy of the camel and the eye of a needle that it is harder for the most likely candidate you can think of to get into heaven. The disciples were astounded! If it is impossible for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God, what hope do any of us

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have? **Then Jesus spoke the comforting words that give us all hope**, *"With man it is impossible, but with God all things are possible."* The only hope you and I have for eternal salvation lies with God. Nothing else will save us No one is good but God! Not our money, our homes, our position, our standing in the community, our credit rating, our stocks and bonds, nothing! The only thing, the only One who can save us is Jesus Christ! As Barclay wrote, "The person who trusts himself and his possessions can never be saved. "But the person who trusts in the saving power and redeeming love of God can enter freely into salvation."

This gospel is timely in the season of stewardship campaigns and pledge making. I don't think our stewardship committees will be making the kind of request that Jesus makes of the rich young man. But what better time to reflect on what Jesus does ask of us? What is the cost of our discipleship? At the very least this passage calls us to examine carefully where our priorities lie and to consider what it would mean to give more of what is most dear to us, whether is our money, our time, or our status in the community. It is a challenge not only to deal with those things that stand in the way of making a full commitment to God, but also to consider how our giving, our choices help to bring about justice in the world, how we help to bring in the kingdom of God. We begin, sometimes without realizing it, to worship things, relating to them as persons. And in the process, we inevitably relate to other

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persons as if they were things. No wonder Jesus spoke five times as often about money and earthly possessions as about prayer. My prayer is that our hearts will be turned by love toward people, not toward the love of things.

Edward Farrell suggests in his book, Gathering the Fragments, "When God breaks in on a sufficiently prepared people, a new generosity emerges, one that is outgoing, joyous, spontaneous and free. Growth in Christian discipleship manifests itself by compassion and cares deeply for all of God's created order."

The choices we might be called to make may not be easy, but we too can be assured that for God and with God all things are possible. ***Amen.***

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