

Proper 23Bi – October 11, 2015
Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Today’s gospel reading from Mark is traditionally called the story of the Rich Young Ruler. Now this makes sense only after reading versions of the story in all three of the gospels of Mark and Matthew and Luke, where each reveals something different about the man. And so, in our reading today from Mark, we discover that the man is rich, but we have to read Matthew’s version to find out that he’s young, and Luke’s version to find out that he is some sort of ruler. Anyway, this wealthy young ruler runs up to Jesus and kneels before him, and straight out asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”ⁱⁱ Jesus replies to the man by going with the flow of his question, and by citing some of the commandments—commandments: the marks of the covenant relationship by which all the people of Israel were to be bound together—the covenant relationship which assured an inheritance of eternal life and a place in God’s Kingdom.

The young man’s reply was that he had obeyed all these commandments since he was a boy—a good answer from an earnest young man. Jesus looks at him deeply, sees the integrity of this young man, and his heart and love really go out to him. However, Jesus also perceives something else that leads him to say, “You lack one thing...” Jesus sees that this wealthy young man has spoken to Jesus from an underlying presumption of privilege, which contributes to his striving to impress Jesus on this young man’s own terms, offering further credentials of his wealth and status as the means through which he sought to find favor with God. As Frederick Buechner put it, this young man probably knew he could solve with his wealth most of the mundane problems that we all face—what to eat, where to live, how to pay the mortgage, the medical bills, his college tuition, as it were. It is also possible that the young man believed he could solve deeper questions with his checkbook as well—like how to be happy, how to love and be loved, how to find meaning and purpose in his life, how to be of service to others.ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus knew this as he looked deeply at the wealthy young ruler. But the young man didn’t hear the answer he was expecting. Instead, he received an answer that cut to the very depth of his relationship with God and with his wealth. “You lack one thing,” Jesus replies, “go sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

Jesus directed this specific answer to this particular man, because the specific issue for him was how his wealth was keeping him from a full relationship with God and, therefore, with others. Sure, he was an earnest, decent, morally upright person; those attributes he didn’t lack. The one thing he lacked was the freedom to be himself without all the trappings of his wealth—which prevented him from being free to relate to others as fellow human beings—as equals—rather than as supplicants or customers or grantees or debtors or some other type of transactional relationship. Jesus directed him to the one thing he lacked, the key to his freedom. But instead, he walks sadly away. This led Jesus to remark

rather tongue-in-cheek that, “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.”^{iv}

Now, money and wealth are imbued with a lot of meaning, economically, psychically and spiritually.^v But wealth was not an issue in general for Jesus. In the New Testament record, possessions in themselves are seen as neither bad nor good—it all depends on the use made of them and the motives, beliefs and the actions or inactions of their owners, as well as how they were obtained. Great possessions are seen as a danger but not a sin. At times, as in today’s gospel account, Jesus spoke much about the perils and possibilities of wealth, but at other times seemed to understate these. Contrary to the popular belief that riches were a sign of God’s blessing and favor, to Jesus, wealth derives any merit or demerit from the service or disservice that such wealth renders. In other words, does it serve God’s Kingdom, and the common good; or does it promote greed and injustice? Is it used in the most effective way of stewardship, or further self-indulgence?

Just as the wealthy young ruler found out that he could not inherit eternal life by buying it with his riches, philanthropically, so also he would not inherit eternal life just by becoming poor, in spite of Peter’s boast to Jesus, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” Eternal life is simply not for sale. The poor cannot buy it with their poverty any more than the rich can buy it with their riches. Eternal life is God’s gift, freely given. When Jesus tells the rich young man to go, sell and give away, and then come and follow, he is not so much asking the young man to *do* something; rather, he is asking him to *become* someone—become himself as one free enough to trust in God’s Love and Mercy wholeheartedly, with “gladness and singleness of heart,”^{vi} as it were.

Now, if the one thing we lack is different for each one of us, the common question for all of us is whether we can discern and become, and will and do, that one thing each of us lacks so that we can will that the will of God and no other be done. As Buechner points out, this was too hard for the wealthy young man who seemed to live and act in two different and conflicting worlds.^{vii} This young man was one who straddled and then fell between two worlds. For it is with all the generous heart, good intentions and recklessness of a child, playing for fun, that he runs up to Jesus and asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life. And when Jesus tells him to sell everything he has, give it to the poor and follow him, it is with all the carefulness and guardedness of a Senior Investment Officer of a conservative Pension Fund, playing for keeps, that the young man walks away sadly. As Walter Brownridge put it, the wealthy young man

“considers himself a proper and pious Jew who obeyed the law. He respectfully asks Jesus what must he do to inherit eternal life. Jesus begins with the recitation of the Law in the form of the Ten Commandments. The Rich Man is able to say that he has kept all those since his childhood. Then Jesus lovingly perceiving the man, as only he can, focuses on the chink in [the armor, as it were, of] this man’s discipleship, [namely] his attachment to his wealth. The man walks away grieving. It is important to say that Jesus was not focused on the man’s wealth per se, but his *attachment* to that wealth. He was unwilling to let go of possessions that

ultimately come from God's generosity and are temporal. His wealth was not eternal, nor was it deserved fruits of labor of a self-made man. To quote Martin Marty, the highest form of idolatry is the self-made man who worships his Creator. A Christian understanding is that all that we have (our life, our freedom, our gifts, our talents and whatever measure of wealth we attain) is from the Grace of a Generous God. Thus, we are called to respond to God's love as a gift of grace. This grace requires us to live each day in gratitude for God's grace and with a spirit that calls us to be generous to God and others with our time, our talent and our treasure. Our call is to put money and possessions into a right relationship with God."^{viii}

What we have or don't have, and what we've done or left undone, provide innumerable distractions, worries and temptations so that, in the end, we, too, live in several worlds, and we will many, often contradictory, things, and are divided within ourselves. And we, too, would likely have walked away if we were the young man in today's gospel. Were we to hear the incisive, discerning and challenging diagnosis of the particular thing each of us lacks, would we be any more ready to listen and obey Jesus than the young man in our story?

We can become fully free to follow, fully and undividedly human and adult when we discover that the ultimate prudence is a kind of holy recklessness, and that our passion for having can find peace in our passion for giving, and that playing for keeps can itself be the greatest fun. As this happens then we may arrive at that place where we are ready to ask and listen for the answer to the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"—and then live it out in this life, and in the life to come.

ⁱ See also Epiphany 4A, Epiphany 6C, Lent 5C (#1), Monday in Holy Week, Propers 13C, 23B, All Saints Day (or Sunday after All Saints) – Years C and A, and Proper 27B. I am also indebted to the following for some of the ideas in this sermon: Barbara Brown Taylor, The Preaching Life (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1993), pp. 121-126; see also "Two Tramps in Mud Time" by Robert Frost, last stanza:

But yield who will to their separation,
My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sakes.

W.E. B. Du Bois summed it up well: "The prayer of our souls is a petition for persistence; not for the one good deed, or single thought, but deed on deed, and thought on thought, until day calling unto day shall make a life worth living" (W.E.B. Du Bois, Prayers for Dark People (Herbert Aptheker, ed. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980)).

ⁱⁱ It's an odd question if you really look at it, because the two verbs, "do" and "inherit" just don't make much sense put together. Think about it: one does not usually inherit anything by *doing* something; instead, one inherits by receiving something freely that *someone else* has already done something to achieve.

ⁱⁱⁱ ... and, with his checkbook, maybe even answer the question he posed to Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”ⁱⁱⁱ The answer he was hoping to hear from Jesus was probably a call to do some great act of philanthropy or charity that would be significant enough to ensure an inheritance of eternal life (See Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), p. 81).

^{iv} Of course, the issue for this particular man seemed to have been his wealth; after all, he walks away after hearing Jesus identify this as his issue.

^v As one observer writes:

“Money is currency, from the Latin *currere*, ‘to run’ or ‘to flow,’ evoking liquid assets, circulation and commerce, from the simplest acts of bartering to the most sophisticated versions of buying and selling, lending and borrowing, profit and loss [saving and spending]...for many [around the world] the dollar bill is emblematic of America the embodiment of capitalism, high finance, big spending, rags-to-riches opportunity and unimaginable wealth...Money evokes psyche’s currency, in the form of libidinal values coined in multifarious images...telling us where energy is invested, accumulating or frozen, where there is wealth or impoverishment, depression or inflation, hoarding or bankruptcy...But whether or not we are able to avail ourselves of such treasure depends in part on the...the ways desire and fear direct our tendencies [to seek and] to save, spend or squander.” (From “Money” in The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism, Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, eds., The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images (Cologne, Germany: TASCHEN, 2010), p. 524).

^{vi} The Book of Common Prayer, (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1977), p. 365.

^{vii} Frederick Buechner, Whistling in the Dark (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 2

^{viii} Walter Brownridge, “Blessed to Be a Blessing” (www.episcopalchurch.org part of 2012 Stewardship Reflection Series).