

Sharing The Wealth

Mark 10:17-31

October 11, 2009

I.

It seems like today's Gospel always is scheduled in October, when stewardship campaigns are underway. This has led some preachers to wrongly proclaim that our eternal destiny is determined only by what we do with our money. We shall see today that is not the case.

And in some ways this gospel reminds me of the story about a rich man who, in his final illness, decided to take his wealth with him. So he told his wife to get all his money together, put it in a sack, and hang it from the rafters in the attic. He said, "When my spirit is caught up to heaven, I'll grab the sack on my way." But after he died the woman went to the attic, only to find the money still there. She said, "I knew I should've put that sack in the basement."

But, back to the message from the reading. If we take Jesus' words literally we must sell all our possessions and give the money to the poor in order to inherit eternal life. However, that would create a paradox, wouldn't it? If we gave everything to the poor, we would be poor ourselves. Then, we would be entitled to the money from the possessions we just sold. And to put it in a more practical context, we could become burdens upon our families or upon society.

And we know Jesus does not require us to sell all we have. In Luke's Gospel Jesus spoke favorably of Zacchaeus, the reformed tax collector, who gave half, not all, of his possessions to the poor (19:8-9). And the Book of Acts shows that the disciples met in their own houses, and thus they obviously did not sell them (2:46).

So, there must be something more to this reading than the literal meaning of its words. This is not a simple story of rewarding people who give away their money and punishing people who do not. Instead, it is a larger story of our place in the world and faith in our lives.

II.

This Gospel always has intrigued me because it demonstrates something I learned as a young lawyer; something that was drilled into us from the earliest days of law school. It was the danger of asking one too many questions. We were taught that when we had the answer we wanted, stop! Resist the temptation to keep on asking questions.

In some ways, the rich young man in our reading violated that basic rule. He asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus said obey the commandments, and listed a few. And importantly, Jesus said nothing more. That was his answer. He did not add anything further.

Well, the young man should have stopped right there, wouldn't you agree? Shouldn't he have said something like, "Thank you good teacher, I appreciate the advice" and let the conversation come to an end? But no, he had to keep on going.

And not only did he keep on going, but he was a little overbearingly self-righteous about it, wasn't he? The young man dismissively said, "The commandments. Oh, those. Why, I've kept them since my youth," as if it was no big deal.

So, what was Jesus going to do now? The young man had just treated God's commandments as fairly routine. And he put Jesus on the defensive. Was Jesus going to affirm the young man's self-righteousness and say, "Well, in that case son, you've got it made. Eternal life is yours"?

Of course not. But apparently that's what the young man thought based on what Jesus said. It seems that the young man understood Jesus' initial answer to mean that he already had earned

eternity through his own efforts, through his own works. And thus his response to Jesus revealed a failure to grasp one of the basic doctrines of the Gospel.

Against that background Jesus gave the answer we would have expected him to give. He did not challenge the young man's claim that he had kept the commandments. And he did not criticize his response. Rather, Jesus prescribed some strong medicine to correct the false impression he perceived the young man to have.

The reading says that Jesus looked at the young man and loved him. In today's jargon we might call it tough love. Perhaps Jesus thought to himself, "So, you believe those commandments are enough? Well, try this." And he told the young man to sell all he had, give the money to the poor, and follow him.

Well, this seemed drastic, but even though Jesus was not speaking literally the rich young man thought he was, and dejectedly walked away. We recall that in other parts of the Gospels Jesus asked the rhetorical question, "What good is it to have your property if you forfeit your soul?" (Mt. 16:26, Mk. 8:36, Lk. 9:25). Today the rich young man just turned that around. His actions basically said, "What good is it to save your soul if you must forfeit your property?"

III.

So, how are we to understand this Gospel today? It can be somewhat disturbing because even though it does not require all Christians to liquidate their assets and give the money to the poor, it does show how wealth can become more important than God. This Gospel shines the spotlight on the tension between having wealth and living in faith.

I think many people in our community can acknowledge they are wealthy within the meaning of this reading, even though they might think otherwise. And they think otherwise because of the way wealth is idolized on television and in the media. Glamour and prestige attach to the rich and very rich, and it can be easy for the rest of us to want the same.

And this is where the enemy uses the weakness in our human nature to deceive us. He tempts us to compare ourselves with those who have more, not those who have less. Satan wants to stimulate our selfishness, not our generosity. But if we lived in the era of today's Gospel, there is little doubt we would be numbered among those who are well off, not those in need.

But we are not in the Gospel, we live in the twenty-first century. And it is a time when there seems to be no correlation between the earthly messages of the culture in which we live, and the godly promises of the kingdom to which we aspire.

All we have to do is look around. One of our fastest growing service industries is self-storage. Think about that for a moment. Do you think there is self-storage in India, or Africa, or Latin America? Probably not much. But here many people fill up their houses and don't stop. They keep right on acquiring and paying others to store things they can't use but can't give up either.

And I'm not saying self-storage is a bad thing. Susan and I had a storage unit in Virginia. But it can be an example of the importance of wealth and possessions in our lives. And this can lead to a dilemma that is not created by our possessions in and of themselves, but rather how we regard them and how they affect us.

IV.

Here are two basic ideas that might help avoid this dilemma. First, Jesus did not condemn wealth. He did not criticize what we understand as the American dream. It is entirely consistent with Scripture to work hard, be successful, and provide for our families.

But second, Jesus does show the folly of being so self-absorbed in the temporary security of material things that the eternal security only God can provide becomes an afterthought.. Today's reading calls us to make sure that the temptations of the world do not turn us away from the foundations of our faith.

God wants us to prosper and be happy. But he also wants to have a relationship with us. How can we do both? As the Gospel tells us, it's a matter of priorities. We are called to put God first, and then all else will follow.

I try to read bumper stickers if I can. They often condense a paragraph of thought into a few pithy words. And I can think of two bumper stickers that clearly define the choices in today's reading. One of them, born of the excesses of the 1970's, said "Whoever Dies With the Most Toys Wins." You probably have heard that idea expressed a time or two. The other said "The Best Things in Life Aren't Things." And that gives us a different perspective.

V.

Today's reading talked about good news, but where is the good news for us today? Where can we find God's grace? The answer is that it's here and always will be. In the midst of our consumer society the good news still exists. The good news of salvation in Jesus Christ transcends societies, transcends economics, and certainly transcends materialistic priorities. God's kingdom is on its way, and nothing we can do will affect that reality. The question is whether will we live our lives so that we will be ready.

And part of the answer is how people handle their worldly possessions. The problem is not holding them, but rather holding them with clenched hands. And if peoples' hands are wrapped around what they already have, then they have no hands to receive the gifts God has ordained for them. Money is a good servant but a poor master. If we possess our wealth that is one thing. If our wealth possesses us that is another.

The realities of the world urge us to hang on to the fruits of our labors. But we are called to let go of some things to serve God's purposes, and that often requires us to do it in faith. Today's Gospel tells us that we cannot always do it ourselves, and must rely on the eternal truth that only God makes such things possible.

The bottom line is that Christ did not come to make us prosperous, but to make us righteous. He did not call us to affluence but to obedience. While he does not want us to be penniless, he also wants us to be generous. And in that inevitable day when we all must account for the content of our lives, the question will not be were we successful, but were we faithful. *Amen.*