

## ***Faith From Affluence***

Mark 10;17-31

October 7, 2012

### **I.**

As we start today, I would like to call your attention to our first reading. It was the beginning of the Book of Job; a well-known, but sometimes misunderstood, book of the Bible.

And to give you a preview, our first readings for the next three weeks also will be from the Book of Job. So, on October 28, after the last reading from Job I will offer a sermon on what that story means, and how it applies to us today. Stay tuned. It might not be what you expect.

Today, however, I would like to talk about our gospel, and it appears that Jesus was doing the same thing today that he did in the gospel readings for the last two weeks. He spoke symbolically and used metaphors to make a point.

Two weeks ago we heard that in order to be first, we must be last. Then last week Jesus said that we should cut off our hand or foot if it caused us to sin. He said the same about plucking our one of our eyes if it caused us to sin.

And we also heard that Jesus did not intend those instructions to be taken literally, but rather he spoke with deeper meanings. When we try to be first, we will fail. We must put God first. And we must cut out, we must remove, those things from our lives that interfere with our relationship with God. Strong language was used to convey important messages.

Today's gospel is similar. Jesus told a wealthy young man that he must sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor in order to have eternal life. Is that how we understand our Christian hope? Probably not. And so let's take a further look at what Jesus said.

### **II.**

And I should begin by saying that this will not be a stewardship sermon. Today's gospel frequently is used for that purpose. But we will get into stewardship later, and Bishop Gray, as I mentioned earlier, will speak a little bit about that when he visits us on October 17.

Today I want to talk in a broader sense about what our Lord calls us to do. And in some ways this gospel reminds me of the story about a very prosperous man who, in his final illness, decided to take his wealth with him.

So he told his wife to close his bank accounts, sell his stock, and put all his money in a sack and hang it from the rafters in the attic. Then 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 thought, "I knew I should've put that sack in the basement."

The moral of that story, and the point of today's gospel, suggest common inferences. They also are points of departure for further inquiry. They lead us to examine the tension between enjoying prosperity and living in faith.

We can start with recognizing how the reading demonstrates something I quickly learned as a young lawyer. It is 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 talking.

This rich young man violated that basic rule, didn't he. 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 complete answer at that point.

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. 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. Jesus responded as we might have expected. He did not challenge the young man's claim that he had kept the commandments. Rather, he prescribed some strong medicine to correct the false impression he perceived the young man to have. Jesus told the young man to sell all he had, give the money to the poor, and follow him.

But even though Jesus was speaking instructively rather than literally, the rich young man sadly walked away. He couldn't do it because he didn't get it.

This reminds us of other occasions when Jesus rhetorically asked what good it was to keep your property if you forfeit your soul (Mt. 16:26, Mk. 8:36, Lk. 9:25). This rich young man turned that around, didn't he? His actions basically said, "What good is it to save your soul if you must forfeit your property?"

### **III.**

So, what do we do with this? On the surface Jesus said to sell our possessions and give the money to the poor if we want to inherit eternal life. However, that would create a paradox if it literally happened.

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 those who had been poor would now have wealth, which they in turn would be required to give back to us.

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.

I think many people in our community can acknowledge they are wealthy within the meaning of this reading, even though they might not have the affluence that is idolized in the media. Glamour and prestige attach to the rich and very rich, and it is easy for the rest of us to want the same.

This is where the enemy can use our human weakness 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. And if we lived back in the time of today's gospel, there is little doubt that we would be numbered among those who are well off, not those in need.

The same probably is true in the twenty-first century, although some might doubt. That's because there seems to be little correlation between the earthly messages of the culture in which we live, and the godly promises of the kingdom to which we aspire.

I am a fan of bumper stickers. They often condense an entire paragraph 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.

#### **IV.**

Here are two basic ideas that might help. 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 and be able to provide for our families.

But second, Jesus does explain 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. When we put God first all else will follow.

This means that the good news still exists in the midst of materialism. The good news of salvation in Jesus Christ transcends societies, transcends economics, and certainly transcends temporal 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 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, they have no hands to receive the gifts God has ordained for them.

But the realities of the world urge us to hang on to the fruits of our labors. God calls us, however, to let go of some things to serve his purposes, and that often requires us to do it in faith. Today's Gospel embraces the eternal truth that we all are part of God's creation, and we honor him in our lives.

And so we recognize 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 eternal question will not be were whether we were successful, but whether were we faithful. *Amen.*