

**Date: Sunday October 11, 2009**

**Scripture: Mark 10:17-31**

**Title: “What Did He Really Mean?”**

**The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): Jesus says to the rich young man that he should sell everything he has and give it to the poor. What does he really mean?**

**The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): Jesus loves us and it is that love which makes it possible for us to enter the Kingdom of God. That’s good news!**

**(Remember, it’s all about God!)**

A little boy was given two dollars; one for church and one for the candy store. He accidently dropped one and before he could get it, it blew into the storm sewer. “Oh no,” he exclaimed, there goes God’s dollar (Flynn).” I share that this morning because we are going to be talking about money and God.

Tony Campolo, the well known evangelical activist, has said that when he was a young man he read the story of Jesus and the rich man offered in today’s gospel reading from Mark and he heard Jesus clearly declare that the young man should sell all that he had and give it to the poor. Tony said that story caused him real problems and worry. But then he went to seminary, studied higher criticism of scripture, and his professors professed that this story did not in fact mean what Tony first thought. According to seminary, Jesus didn’t really say, “Sell all you have and give it to the poor, then come and follow me.” What he really said was, “You should be willing to give away all you have to the poor. You don’t really have to do it; you just need to be willing to do it.” Tony was relieved. That made it much

easier to follow Jesus knowing that he didn't need to sell everything and give it to the poor. But after many years of thought, study, and prayer, Tony got back to what can be described as his youthful dis-ease understanding the possibility that Jesus really meant to say exactly what Tony first thought; sell it all and give it to the poor (Willimon).

There was an article by Educator and author Bill McKibben in 2005 that appeared in *Harper's Magazine* that I am paraphrasing a portion of today. In the article it is pointed out that forty percent of Americans can name more than four of the Ten Commandments. That means sixty per cent cannot. Only half of us can cite all four of the gospel authors. Three quarters of us believe that the Bible teaches "God helps those who help themselves." It doesn't; that was Ben Franklin. McKibben notes the irony that America is simultaneously the most self - admitted Christian of developed nations and yet the least Christian in its behavior.

Days before his crucifixion Jesus said that the way you could tell the righteous from the damned is by whether they fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, and visited the prisoner. How would Jesus evaluate us today?

In these first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, America ranks second to last, after Italy, among developed nations in government aid. Per capita we each provide fifteen cents a day in official development assistance to poorer countries. Our government is miserly in giving to the world's poor. And before you think that might be because we give to charities that in return provide the relief, our giving to charities raises

that daily total by just six cents – to a grand total of twenty one cents a day. It's also not because we are so busy taking care of our own. Eighteen per cent of American children live in poverty compared with eight percent in Sweden. In fact, by pretty much any measure of caring for the least of these that we might want to examine – childhood nutrition, infant mortality, access to preschool, health care – our overwhelmingly Christian nation trails badly in the ways in which Jesus paid particular attention. Maybe things will get better under a Democratic administration willing to spend more on caring for the people of this nation because between 1999 and 2003, households in this country that were considered food insecure, that means not knowing where the next meal is coming from, climbed by twenty six percent.

So Bill McKibben writes that we have done a pretty good job in the church of loving our neighbor in the pew, but the theology that challenges us to love those further from the pew, the hungry, the sick, the imprisoned, well then the loving becomes a problem. And the dominate prosperity theologies of this century don't challenge us. Instead, they undercut Jesus, soften his hard words, muffle his call, and in the end silence him.

I am sharing all this today because of the young man who approaches Jesus in the gospel reading and who wants to engage Jesus in a theological discussion about eternal life. Interestingly, Jesus doesn't want to take on the theological debate but instead invites the man to be his disciple. Jesus did not say let's talk about what we believe and see if we can find agreement. No, what he said was, "Here's what you need to do to follow me."

With that, the author of Mark says, the young man got depressed, turned away, and walked in the other direction. Mark says the reason the man walked was because of money. He didn't walk because he failed to believe in Jesus as the Savior or because he was unsure the Jesus was Lord. He walked away because of all the stuff he had (Mark 10:17-31).

Throughout the gospels Jesus calls many people to be his disciples. Most of the time, when Jesus calls, the people drop what they are doing and follow him; Peter, Andrew, and the other twelve would all be examples. Today's reading is the only place, according to William Willimon, where anyone has a direct, face to face meeting with Jesus and a call to discipleship and turns away (Willimon). And the reason is money. I often say, the answer to every question, every question, in our 21<sup>st</sup> Century western culture is money. The answer to every question ought to be God, but it is money.

Bill McKibben shares one more example that shows our lack of commitment to following Christ and our love of money. In 2002, Bob Riley was elected governor of the state of Alabama where ninety percent of residents identify themselves as Christians. Riley is considered a conservative – he was never known to vote for a tax increase while serving in congress. When he took over the government of Alabama he found himself overseeing a tax code that dated to 1901. The richest people in the state paid no more than three percent of their income in taxes and the poorest paid up to twelve percent. A family of four making just forty six hundred dollars a year were subject to income tax. In comparison, Mississippi

had a limit of nineteen thousand before a family of four would be taxed.

Conservative Governor Bob Riley proposed a tax increase in order to dig the state out of a fiscal crisis and to put more money in to the state education coffers. He made the case that this was the Christian thing to do. Had this proposal passed, the owner of a two hundred fifty thousand dollar home would have been taxed fourteen hundred thirty two dollars on that property. Well, not to worry, the proposal did not pass. It was crushed by a factor of 2 to 1. Sixty eight percent of those who voted, and remember, this would be six eight percent of a self proclaimed Christian population, voted against this measure. The opposition was led by not only the state's wealthiest interest but also by the Christian Coalition of Alabama. The president of the coalition said, "You'll find Alabamians have a charitable heart. They just don't want it to affect their pockets. On their website, the Christian Coalition made the point that taxing the rich punishes success and that when an individual works for their income, that money belongs to them. Like the young rich man, the Alabamians walked away from their Christian call because of money. Governor Riley said, "I'm tired of Alabama being first in things that are bad and last in things that are good" (Willimon). That puts on whole new twist on the thought of the first and last as expressed by Jesus today.

Those darn Alabamians. Isn't that what we are thinking? How could they do that to the poor? That's what I was thinking as I worked with this article. I was about ready to end the sermon right here reminding us not be like them. But then I went to the Pettis County Ministerial Association meeting this past Wednesday.

Ten pastors and two community leaders sat and talked about how more than 50% of Pettis County residents are behind on their electric bills according to KCPL. We talked about how Pettis County Community Partnership's most recent homeless head count shows one hundred eleven unsheltered homeless in Pettis County, thirty-three of which are children. When we got done talking, at the conclusion of the meeting, I was asked to pray. I prayed calling upon the name of Jesus Christ. Then what did we do? After calling upon the name of Christ and committing ourselves as followers of Christ, we walked away. Kind of like the rich guy in this morning's passage and kind like the Alabamians. And kind of like us. We gather here on Sundays, give thanks and praise to God and celebrate our Christianity, and then we walk away.

We walk away because there's not much chance that any of us are going to sell all we have and give it to the poor. But that leaves a nagging question. What does this passage mean for those of us who have been blessed with some wealth - and all of us have been blessed with wealth in comparison to the rest of the world - some have excessive wealth, some have just enough, and some have very little wealth. Still, how tough will it be for any of us to inherit eternal life? Like Tony Campolo, I believe Jesus means what he says, "It will be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (v.25). So where does this leave us? Well, there is a very important part of this passage that often gets overlooked. When the rich young man approached Jesus and asked him the questions he asked, Jesus looked at him and loved him.

Jesus loved him and Jesus loves us.

That's the message I bring today. We are loved by Christ and that is very good news. For while it might be easier for the camel to get through the eye of the needle than for us to inherit eternal life, Jesus also says, and means, that with God all things are possible. How is it possible for the rich to get into heaven? How is it possible for the richest country in the world to turn its attention to Christian need? How is it possible to get that camel through the eye of a needle? I'll give you a hint. The answer is not money. The answer is God. Let us give thanks to God who makes all things possible and let us pray.

O Source of All Possibility,

We pray this day with gratitude for your love. In the midst of shock and grief and worry about all of our possessions and not wanting to sell and give the money to the poor, remind us that what we think we have is yours. Perhaps our willingness to share more today than yesterday will lead us further along the path as followers for you. This we hope and pray. Amen.

Offering: One dollar went in the drain but that left another dollar for the candy store. What we will do with our dollars? The users will please come forward.

Dedication: Lord, accept and bless this that we give as a sign that we hear you and follow you willing to serve others. We offer and pray in your name. Amen.

Benediction: Go forth this day, blessed, loved, and assured of God's saving grace.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, go forth. Amen and Amen.

Source:

Flynn, Bernice and Leslie; Humorous Notes, Quotes, and Anecdotes; Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, MI; 1973.

Holy Bible – New Revised Standard Version; Harper Bibles: San Francisco; 2007.

Willimon, William; Pulpit Resource; Logos Productions: Inver Grove Heights, MN; 2009.