

St. Paul's Congregational Church  
 October 14, 2018; Mark 10:17-31 Proper 23B  
 What Must I Do?  
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

This gospel story today is one of the most familiar stories of the New Testament, especially in the fall when churches are launching their annual Pledge campaign. It's also one of the most problematic – both for what it seems to say about those who are wealthy – and for what it says about who in fact can inherit eternal life, and enter the kingdom of God. It's especially troublesome, I think, for us gathered here – today most of us live comfortable lives – we usually don't have to worry about paying the mortgage or the heating bill, having a variety of foods on the table, enough clothes to wear, our children getting a good education – we usually don't have to worry about paying the tax bill, even though we may not like it very much. But we are exceedingly comfortable compared to most of the world, aren't we, even compared to many of our neighbors living within a few miles of this place. Yes, this passage is about money and we expect to hear that during the pledging campaign but it's about much, much more than that too. It's about idolatry. It's about priorities. It's about what gets in the way of our relationship with God and each other. And it's about choices. Choices that we make every day whether they are conscious or not.

A man, who is both young and a ruler among his people, approaches Jesus with a question – “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” A little context here: within the Hebrew tradition, it was the wealthy who were the ones who had the time to read the scriptures and pray. Remember Tevya's song in *Fiddler on the Roof*? “If I were a rich man I'd have the time I lack/to sit in the synagogue and pray/and maybe have a seat by the Eastern wall/and I'd discuss the learned books with the holy men/seven hours every day/and that would be the sweetest thing of all.”

So here we have a rich young man who presumably has spent a lot of time in synagogue reading and praying. He's a good and pious young man. Let us not have any doubts about the sincerity of this man – his integrity is not the question. Now imagine the scene: he's excited to meet Jesus in person at his synagogue. He's probably heard of his miracles – and he knows Jesus preaches of the kingdom of God. This young man is truly blessed in the ways that the world, and indeed many of the church, count

blessings. And he wants even more – he wants the blessings of heaven – he wants to enter the kingdom of God and there dwell with Abraham and all who have gone before him. And now he finally has the chance to speak with the teacher first hand and ask the question that’s been bothering him for a long time – what do I have to do to inherit eternal life. In response, Jesus asks him if he has kept the commandments – and it’s interesting that the commandments he cites are those which especially relate to how we treat one another. Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not give false testimony. Do not defraud. Honor your father and mother.

The young man answers that he has kept them all faithfully from the days of his childhood and Jesus, we are told, looked at him and loved him.

But then comes the answer that stuns the disciples and the young man: you lack one thing: go and sell all that you have and give it to the poor. And you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.

The disciples are shocked by this: after all, if the wealthy can’t get into the kingdom, who can!

And the young man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. Jesus looks around and says to his disciples, “how hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

We never really hear how things turned out for the rich young ruler. We do know that he goes away from Jesus, dejected, depressed that day. We don’t know whether or not he later follows the command that Jesus gave him. Whether he does or not is never mentioned and maybe it’s not important for us to know.

What we do need to realize, though, is that this is a very unusual story, even for the gospel of Mark. It’s a call story and it’s the only one about somebody who refuses to follow Jesus – for that reason alone, we should sit up and take notice – this story can teach us so much about what it means to be a disciple. And it’s a tough lesson indeed. But Jesus didn’t let the young man off the hook and we aren’t off the hook either. We have to make choices, just like the rich young man did.

We’re not all that different from the rich young ruler, are we. Setting aside the relative affluence that we have in common, there’s more. We’re here on Sunday mornings, hopefully to become closer to God, to know Jesus and his teachings, to receive the strength from the liturgy and each other to go about our daily lives in a more Christ-like way. We read the Bible, sing our praises, bow in prayer, listen to the ancient words – we’re here because we want to learn, to love God and our neighbor, and to respond to Christ’s

call to follow. And just like that young man, we are faced with making this choice. And like him, I think we're great at living faithfully until someone mentions giving up all the stuff we've accumulated, changing our way of living in a radical way.

Was this man's problem simply that he loved money more than he loved God? Maybe so.

The love of money is most certainly an evil – notice, it's the LOVE of money, not money in and of itself that's evil – that's the idolatry here - and for sure, Jesus' words about the dangers of being rich should give us all something to think about. I know this story touches a nerve in us – it does in me, especially when I consider my pledge for next year or even when I'm deciding where I will spend my time. But we mostly are struck by the reference to money. People will ask, "What's wrong with having money? Why do people who have money always get picked on?"

Well, I'm not sure that Jesus was just telling the young man, is telling us, you have to give up your money or else. I think Jesus looked deeply into this young man's eyes, into his soul, and knew that his possessions were so important to him that he couldn't let them go. And any thing we can't let go of automatically takes a higher place in our lives than God does. It was the man's continuing attachment that created the problem. It was the idol of the love of money that created the problem.

The question is obviously more than about money. It's about what gets in the way of putting God first. It's about what is most important to us. It's about what we value most. It's about clearing a place for God in our lives. What gets in your way? What do you lack? What do you have to give up to follow Jesus? What stuff do we need to leave behind to fully give ourselves to discipleship?

We may even wonder is this even a realistic desire in this world we live in? Is it really possible these days to walk the talk. Have we moved so far away from the simpler life Jesus calls us to? Has the world intruded so irrevocably that it's impossible to be disciples 24/7? Maybe. But maybe not.

I wonder if this question is contributing to the decline of many mainline Christian denominations these days – many are feeling the contempt of a society that clearly identifies the dissonance between what is being preached and what is lived. We so often separate our faith learnings from our daily lives – for how many people is church membership but another activity in their lives? What difference does it make, anyway when we leave this place on Sunday mornings?

This is perhaps a little thing but I think symptomatic of this intrusion, this question: I can't help but think of the signs in many churches, please turn off your cellphones as you come into this house of worship. When I do a wedding or even a funeral in church, I often welcome the people and ask them to turn off their electronics as a courtesy to others. Imagine! Can we come before God in worship undistracted? That's certainly a challenge – we all have a lot on our minds for sure – pains, joys, worries, thinking about what we're going to do this afternoon, wondering if we'll make the soccer game on time, what will happen tomorrow – thinking about our jobs, our children, our parents. But can we open our minds and hearts to hear Jesus speaking to us? Do we hear that voice?

And then we have to make a choice – just like the rich young man had to make a choice. What's our response? Do we turn and walk sadly away? Or do we take a deep breath and the leap of faith to follow Jesus, leaving our attachments behind.

This is tough stuff! As I've been reflecting on this passage this week, I've felt awfully uncomfortable at times. Trying to name what it is I need to leave behind in order to more fully follow Jesus. I have enough clothing, my house is warm – yesterday I finally turned the furnace on! I have food available to me – I have friends and family who care about me – I am indeed blessed and even rich. Sometimes I even feel a little guilty about all that – but I've come to realize that it's an accident of birth that I was born in Connecticut rather than the Sudan or Haiti or the projects in Newark. It's an accident of birth that I was born into a privileged situation. What really matters is what I do, what each of us do, with these blessings – and they are truly blessings. What matters is that we don't let these blessings take over our lives. What matters is that we live in an attitude of gratitude to God for these blessings and don't get caught up in an arrogance, a sense of entitlement, or of fear for tomorrow. What matters is what we share.

A minister writes about a man in his congregation: he was very faithful, very pious, and worked for a bank for many, many years. Then the bank had a shuffle, wanted to transfer him somewhere else, and he quit. He ended up going into the mortgage business. He found a partner for independent financing. Eighteen months later the partner said, "I have been funding this and it is not turning around so I'm going to pull out." The man got really worried – money was tight - he and his wife were living on their savings. Then the boom hit, and within two years he had a million dollars in the bank. His pastor says, he was the most guilty millionaire I had ever seen in my life. He just didn't know what to do. It really bothered him that God gave him all that money. In the end he did some wonderful things with it –

for instance, he brought Vietnamese kids here to this country and went on to Saigon and to Hanoi to work as a teacher.

It's what we do with our blessings that matters— not seeing them as ends in themselves, but gifts from God to be shared. And friends, that's the definition of Stewardship – to be stewards, not owners, of the blessings we have been given. We make a choice to follow or not, we have a choice to share our time, talents, treasure – our very selves.

We make a choice to follow or not when we step out of ourselves and understand that we can think differently from each other but still love each other. We make a choice to follow or not when we refuse to participate in malicious gossip. We make a choice to follow or not when we treat each other with compassion and dignity, no matter what our peers may think. We make a choice to follow when we truly make an effort to empty ourselves to all the pushes and pulls of a society that certainly doesn't encourage a life of faith and devotion to the God who made us all. And we make a choice to follow when we recognize those idols in our lives and put them into a proper perspective and really take a look at the priorities in our lives. What idols are ruling your life? Will you turn and walk sadly away?

Jesus is very clear about what it takes to follow him and it's always our choice whether we will follow or not. The call of Jesus is to die to the past; to whatever has you stuck; the rich young man had to die to his wealth, his status, his position.

But it is not a dying without hope – for in the dying comes the promise of rising to new life, to a new community, to a new relationship. Jesus tells his disciples, tells us, that leaving everything behind for Him and for the gospel will bring a hundred times as much in this present age and in the age to come, eternal life! Hear that promise. Hear that good news. That's grace and that's cause to rejoice.

As many times as I've read this passage, I always hear something new: let's go back to that verse after the young man tells Jesus he's followed all the commandments since he was a boy. It says, Jesus looked at him and loved him. Even as he walked away. What wondrous love is this!

In the midst of all our struggles, in the midst of all our blessings even, Jesus loves us. Jesus wants us to shed all our idols and follow him – and Jesus makes it clear that he knows this is hard. Who then can be saved? This message could be thoroughly depressing, couldn't it – but not when we realize that the core message in today's reading is this answer Christ makes: all things are possible with God. Do we really believe the promises of God in Christ? Christ has promised that if we hold onto him, he will never let us go. Christ has promised that anything we give to him will be returned a

hundred fold. He promised us treasure in heaven. Are you willing to take him at his word?

As the rich young ruler slowly and sadly walked away, stooped over in grief, I have a picture in my mind of Jesus looking after him with great compassion, perhaps with a gentle smile on his face, maybe even with tears welling up in his eyes. The same challenge is in front of us – along with the same promise, hope, and love that Jesus offers us.

Each of us, no matter how faithful we are, has the potential to hold something back. We have the potential of keeping one door of our hearts closed to God. We have the potential to love one thing too much to allow God to use it. We have the potential of letting that one thing – that one idol, small though it may be – grow in importance to such an extent that it overshadows our faithfulness.

But we also have the potential of learning to let go of that one thing, of making small beginnings to be more faithful and more open to God and others. We have this potential because all things are possible with God. And because, even when we are shocked that this one last stronghold must be now opened to God's intrusion, and when we turn away in sadness and grief – grief that we are losing that one last thing – Jesus looks after us and loves us. There's the profound hope and deep and abiding love right along with the challenge. May we walk into the waiting arms of Jesus and follow him more nearly day by day. Amen.