

Christ Episcopal Church

2 Emerson Street

East Norwalk, Connecticut 06855 The

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost:

Proper 23 (B)

October 14, 2018

8 and 10 AM Sermons

Sermons by the Rev. Joe Parrish

DRAFT

“Feeling good”

The Holy Gospel according to

Mark 10:17-31

As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before Jesus, and

asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he was shocked

and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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.” They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” Peter began to

say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

Dear God, create in us clean hearts, and sustain us with your Holy Spirit. Amen.

There was once a trusting abbot who was taken aback by the spiritual progress of a young disciple. The abbot let the disciple live in his own lean-to down by the river. Each night he would wash his one robe and put it out to dry. One morning the disciple was dismayed to find that the rats had torn his robe to shreds. He begged for another from a nearby village, only to have the rats destroy that one as well. He got a cat, but he found he had to beg for milk for the cat. To get around that, he got a cow; but, of course, that meant he had to have hay. He got the hay from the fields around his hut. Then he had to get workers to help. Soon the once

poor disciple was the wealthiest man in the region. Several years later, the abbot comes back to find a mansion in place of a hut. The abbot asked the monk what was the meaning of all this? “Oh Holy Abbot, there was no other way to keep my robes....” The more we are wrapped up in ourselves, the further we move from God and what God wants of us. Every self-serving obligation prevents us from helping another, from being a part of the transforming of the world around us.

Pastor Phil Peterson, pastor at Faith
Lutheran Church, Forest Lake, Minnesota,

writes, “I have begun to suspect that the anxiety of our age may even extend to pets. One night, our dog Jake had been impossible in his demands for attention. He must have been feeling insecure about all the other dogs parading by our house because he would bark at them and then insist on having our undivided attention. He would put his forelegs on my lap and stare meaningfully into my eyes, so that I could see only Jake. And Jake’s unique breath filled my nostrils so that I could only think of Jake. Almost as a form of bribery we gave Jake a rawhide bone to chew on. Our hope was that Jake’s attention would be

fixed on the bone, and he would leave us alone. And for a few minutes that was the case. After a while Jake's pacing around the room fascinated my wife Debbie and me. At one point Jake placed the bone behind a pillow on the love seat. Moments later he picked the bone up and continued wandering around the house. Eventually we realized that Jake was trying to find a place to safely store the bone. And he was becoming more agitated as his search continued. Nowhere in the house was suitable. Jake began to whine as he carried the bone from room to room. And his pacing and whining was worse than his meaningful stares. Finally,

Debbie took the bone away from him and stored it in the cupboard. And that seemed to satisfy Jake, who by now was exhausted.”

Scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann in an essay entitled “The Truth of Abundance” writes about what he calls the ‘myth of scarcity’. “The reality of a drought or a famine or some other cause creates a sense of scarcity, a deep, fearful, anxious conviction that there is not enough to go around, and that no more will be given. The proper response, given that anxiety, is to keep everything you have, to get good protection to keep what you have

from others who want it, to take steps to secure still more at the expense of others, more that may belong to others, more than you need, more than you will ever need.

The myth of scarcity that can drive an economy is not based on economic analysis but on anxiety. The myth of scarcity produces and even seems to justify violence against the neighbor. The myth of scarcity makes each of us an agent of acquisitiveness [competing with all others] who pursue acquisitiveness.”

<https://www.luthersem.edu/stewardship/default.aspx?m=6667&post=3762>

Sometimes, even if we are the pet dog, our possessions possess us, which means, ...we too can be ‘possessed’, an interesting thought as we come to Halloween.

The famous Beetle’s song, “All you need is love” does not say why, ‘all we need is love’, but we interpret the song as we will. However, in today’s Gospel Jesus ‘loved’ the man who came up to Jesus to ask about inheriting eternal life. Perhaps the man half expected Jesus to mention some of the commandments--no murder, no adultery, no stealing, no defaming, no defrauding, and honor one’s mother and father. Those are

the six which refer to how we relate to those around us; but when the man affirmed that for sure he did indeed follow those six commandments, Jesus then challenges him with how he gives his money to the poor, and the man freaks out, especially when Jesus says sell everything and give the money to the poor. We all are likely in that same shoes as was that man. How many have sold everything they have and given it all to the poor? Zero is a probable answer. So, we perhaps mentally begin to negotiate with God, maybe a tithe will be enough, maybe a double tithe, what about five percent, and so on. But the man heard Jesus

and (quote) “went away grieving”
(unquote). And we all slink away quietly,
thinking maybe Jesus got it all wrong--who
will feed us, clothe us, house us when we
too have nothing left. But the loopholes
seem closed. The disciples heard the same
words and asked, “Then who can be saved?”
Jesus’ response was that the disciples had
left everything and had followed him.
Again, we are caught up short. Who here
has left everything to follow Jesus? But
Jesus affirms the disciples and encourages
them by telling them that whatever the
disciples left to follow him will be
compensated as no trust fund could ever do:

they will receive a hundred fold “now in this age”—“houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions”—I presume the writer is thinking of the little field where the Christians gather and where the powers that be are continuously hunting them down as martyrs, or it may be about the little cave or hut of a church where the writer worships and remembers the leaks and the drafts and the lack of funds to heat it and fix the floors and doors and so on; so perhaps in that way the writer of Mark resonates with Jesus’ words of receiving “fields with persecutions”. And then there is that

wonderful promise that they will receive “in the age to come eternal life.”

But love is apparently not enough. Jesus loved the man who came up to him, but Jesus’s noticed the man’s flaw was that he did not sell what he had and give it to the poor.

We negotiate, usually, we negotiate what we will give to the poor.

Early on in my ministerial career I was walking across Third Avenue in New York and a beggar was following me after I had given him some pocket change right as the light turned green. He pestered me all the way across the very broad Third Avenue,

and to try to keep him quiet I slowly emptied my pocket little by little of all my change. But of course, that was not enough, so I finally out-walked him on the sidewalk. I had given a token, actually all of my change, but those sticky bills in my wallet were quite safe, thank you very much....

So, we develop rules about how we are to protect those sticky bills: do not open one's billfold on the street, especially when beggars are around, and so on and so on. So far, however, I have not found a particular limit on what Jesus is asking of me.

My credit cards seem to be a final bastion of safety. Alas, I found I can buy someone a

debit card with my credit card, so my barrier is leaking just a tiny bit.

When stewardship season comes, and it will, we may have to think again about the unthinkable. How on earth can I give all? Would Jesus be happy with maybe a double tithe or a half a tithe?

A current idea that has occurred to me is that we give more only if we get more. That sounds very reasonable, doesn't it? We are accustomed to paying more for something that is high quality, or scarce, or more of the same thing. But we generally want to get the same for less. And each year we tell ourselves we should not pay more for

anything. Or if we are particularly financially wise, maybe we recognize the ‘cost of living’ clause, raise a pledge by ‘cost of living’, that is if we got a ‘cost of living’ raise ourselves.

We generally only give more if we have gotten more. That is our general sensibility. And if we have not gotten more out of life from our faithful church attendance, then why give more. Hopefully, when we reflect on the last year, God may have blessed us in particular ways. How do we express our gratitude? Maybe God deserves at least a tip?

The recent hurricane has shown how many vulnerable people there are in our society, ones who lost everything. It doesn't even take a hurricane for folks to lose everything. I generally find that homeless people either have no family or they are estranged from their family. So technically they are orphans, or widows, or widowers. Then as we recognize 'what we have that they need', our hearts warm and we begin to open up a few treasures to fill desperate needs, needs near and needs far. I think sometimes God continues to nudge us along the giving path. We may kick and scream a

bit, but giving feels so good after we have given.

Maybe that is what Jesus was saying.

Amen.

Description:

Jesus loved the rich man, but said he had to give more, even all, to the poor. How has God nudged us to give more?

Tags:

Poor, rich, Third, Avenue, wallet, change, bills, credit, cards, nudged, negotiate, give, hurricane, vulnerable, orphan, widow, widower, tithe, stewardship, beggar, love, martyrs, dog, abbot, monk, Beetles, commandments, cost, living

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Clarksboro, New Jersey 08020
and
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The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost:

Proper 23B

October 11, 2015

DRAFT

“God, the possibility creator”

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

The Holy Gospel according to

Mark 10:17-31

As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before Jesus, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Jesus,

looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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.” They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age

to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

Dear God, with you all things are possible. Amen.

Probably by definition, all Americans and Europeans and many in Asia and elsewhere are rich, relative to most of the rest of the world. So, this proclamation of Jesus about the rich having great difficulty entering God's Kingdom pertains to us personally. Thus we all need to answer the question, how do I get around this proclamation of Our Lord, “How hard it will

be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”? Or does it apply to me and all of us regardless?

One of my good priest friends on the East Side of Manhattan used in his sermon on this gospel the often told supposedly legendary story about one of the gates to Jerusalem being called the “Eye of the Needle.” And that camels coming to Jerusalem bearing the riches from the East had to be unloaded and made to crawl through that gate in order to get through to the City of Jerusalem, and he offered us the solace that indeed the camel did get through the gate and those goods could follow.

However, sorry to say, to the best of our present historic knowledge there was never such an “Eye of the Needle” gate in Jerusalem but only that nice story told by my friend and others to help relieve our consciences.

You have probably heard the saying that ‘there is no need for a trailer on a hearse.’
‘There is no need for a trailer on a hearse.’

I still vividly recall one of my classmates in seminary coming to class the day after we had read this story from Mark’s gospel, and that morning she looked all disheveled and sleepless and without makeup, whereas the day before she was all ‘done up’ so nicely.

She bemoaned to us the fact that she had been deeply grieved that night by Jesus' statement when comparing it with her own pretty secure financial situation. The rest of us assured her that the story was only a figure of speech and that she really didn't have to take it to heart. She was greatly relieved by our pronouncement of innocence and release from her feeling of great guilt. Of course, none of us that day had jobs, so we were impoverished but living on the earnings of our spouses or parents, or on student loans or scholarships given us by the seminary or by our denominations or others. So, we had really very little to worry about.

But had my classmate really in fact heard the intent of what Jesus was saying? Do we relatively rich people have to be concerned about how wealthy we are in relationship with most of the rest of the poverty-stricken world? Nearly one billion in the world live in abject, staving poverty. How have we given to the poor? And if we have given them some of our all, how can we still justify our remaining riches and our feeling we are indeed on the way to the Promised Heavenly Land upon our demise from this life? We all cling mightily to Jesus' further comment: "For mortals it is impossible, but

not for God; for God all things are possible.”

And we breathe a slight sigh of relief.

Adrian Rogers offers this story about a man who loved gold. One day the man inherited a fortune. With joy he redecorated his bedroom. He put gold parchment wallpaper up, hung golden yellow curtains, had a golden colored rug and a yellow bedspread. He even bought golden yellow pajamas. But then he got sick and came down with, of all things, yellow jaundice. His wife called the doctor who made a house call and went up to that bedroom to examine the man. The doctor was there for

a long time. When he came down, the wife asked, “How is he?” “Don’t know,” said the doctor. “I couldn’t find him.”

An old monk was mentoring a young disciple. Believing that he had the ability to be on his own, the monk allowed the boy to live in a lean-to near the river bank. Each night, happy as a lark, the young disciple put out his loincloth, his only possession, to dry. One morning he was dismayed to find that his loin cloth had been torn to shreds by rats. So he begged for a second loincloth from the villagers. When the rats came to destroy that one, he got a cat to keep the rats away.

But then he had to beg for milk not only for food but also for milk for the cat. To get around that he acquired a cow by doing various menial jobs in the village. But then he realized he had to seek food for the cow. He concluded, finally, that it would be easier to work the land around his hut, so he left off his prayers and meditations and committed himself to growing crops to feed the cow. The operation expanded. He hired workers. He married a wife who kept the household running smoothly. Pretty soon he was one of the wealthiest people in the village. Several years later the old monk came back to find a mansion where the lean-

to had been. “What is the meaning of this?” the monk asked. The disciple replied, “Holy Father, there was no other way for me to keep my loincloth.”

I still recall sequentially owning more than one car in my college days that cost \$50 or less; my first one cost only \$35; they were essentially ‘throw away cars’, and I squeezed the last bit of life from them as a poor but still well-fed university student. My income was from doing various student jobs from working in a bookstore to being a beverage boy in a girls’ dorm to being a librarian. My big break came when my chemistry professor hired me and my friend

to run a chemistry laboratory where we produced a rare metal called rhenium for the General Electric Company and for others for test rocket nose cones because it has the highest melting point of any metal, including tungsten. The professor had an exclusive patent on the processes for that metal extraction process. However, I still drove a \$50 automobile. But later I got a full fellowship from Harvard.

There was an old coal miner ballad by Tennessee Ernie Ford whose lines were, “I owe my soul to the company store.” The miners never made enough to make ends

meet, so they were constantly in debt to the “company store”.

I don't know if you are in debt to the “company store” or something else. Most American have credit balances they never are quite able to pay off, and now they owe upwards of fifteen percent or so on that debt, and they are trapped by it.

On the Garden State Parkway and the New Jersey Turnpike, there is always a long line in the “Cash” lanes. I was at a church conference last week where there were various booths of Christian companies selling their wares. One was a stewardship company that had a trivia contest to win a

new I-Pad. One question was what is the average monthly US car payment? And the possible answers were approximately \$300, \$500, and \$700 a month. What do you think was the answer? \$492, or almost \$500 a month. I calculated that to be about \$6,000 per year. The average American must make at least about \$7,200 before tax just to keep up with their car payments; and if the average car owner travels an average of around 15,000 miles a year, the supposedly 'real cost' of driving, the standard IRS allowance of 56 cents per mile would convert that to about \$8,400, which would require one to make a total of over \$15,600

before tax per year to own and operate a car as an average American. Then add to that the mortgage or rent, food, and other necessities. And no wonder so many have extended their credit cards to the limit, and the Cash lines at the toll booths continue to be very long.

A former boss of mine at Bristol-Myers decades ago bought his home in a nice suburb on the north shore of Long Island with his platinum credit card. I am not sure what the interest was back then, maybe 15 to 20 percent? So even his sizeable monthly check was pretty crimped by his credit card payments.

The wisdom of Jesus is to sell what you own so it doesn't own you. That of course seems to get more and more difficult the older we get. But we need to recognize we are living in the richest country on earth. And what we give makes a tremendous difference in the rest of the world, and even right here in our local area.

Internationally, an average of 35,000 children die each day of malnutrition and starvation.

R.W. Church gave a sermon in about 1894, over a hundred years ago, in which he noted that we all have a time “when He who gives us life calls for it again.” We really ‘own’ nothing ultimately. It all goes back to God.

Perhaps you have seen the cartoon where a group of dour and sour faces are looking on as a lawyer is reading a person's will. “It seems,” said the lawyer, “that he really did take it with him.”

The late Catholic mystic Henri Nouwen said we Americans live the (quote) “filled but unfulfilled life” (end quote). The playwright Oscar Wilde said, “There are two

tragedies in life--not getting what one wants, and the other is getting what one wants.”

Dean Howard Thurman of the Boston University Marsh Chapel made an impact on a group of adults taking his seminar titled, “Spiritual Resources and Disciplines”. The Dean read from the diary of Admiral Byrd who was alone and near death at the North Pole. He asked his class, “If you were alone, a thousand miles from any other person, if it was fifty degrees below zero and you were dying, what would have to happen for you to die with integrity and a sense of completion?”

One way or another we all will have to mull that question near the end of our time on this planet. How can we die with integrity and a sense of completion?

The man who knelt at Jesus' feet and sought a way to “inherit eternal life” was probably contemplating just that. “Is that all that there is?” goes an old ballad sung by the late Peggy Lee. Have we done our best, or did we slack off in places? How can we become true followers of the one who has eternal life in his hands?

We are indeed possessed by our possessions. We pray that somehow someday we will be given an opportunity to

crawl through the eye of a needle in front of a pearly gate. May we be carrying very little when that happens. And may what we did with what we had be responsive to Jesus' loving reply to the man with many possessions. Jesus gave that man the formula for the life in heaven he was seeking. Give, and you will get eternal life.

Amen.