



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 21 – Proper 23 Year B

Possessions

[RCL]: Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

In today's Gospel, a man with many possessions encountered Jesus. His wealth of possessions is central to the message.

Possessions – are they good or bad? Blessings or hindrances? Deficits or potential assets?

Like many aspects of life, it all depends. But, perhaps, the more important questions are: What is this Gospel story all about? How does Jesus use the possessions to teach his disciples about God? How can possessions or anything else make all the difference in our seeking ultimate answers about the meaning of our lives?

The man with many possessions started off with a question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” He was looking for an inheritance – not a gift or a payment or an allowance or a reward – but an inheritance. The Greek word quoted by Mark seems to convey exactly what it does to us. Did the man with many possessions see himself as a child of God who was due a birthright like one might expect from a parent? Yet, the dialogue that followed his question seems more like an exercise in earning something rather than inheriting it.

Whatever the case, he wanted Jesus to tell him how to secure the benefits of God's most fundamental values – and to find the key to a meaningful, contented, and fulfilling life.

Jesus' initial response to “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” is also quite interesting. Referring to the Ten Commandments, he offered a list of what the man had to do to qualify. But when the man with many possessions testified to his lifelong practice of following the commandments, Jesus sought to provoke in him, as he provokes in us, a whole new level of understanding about eternal life in God. With love for him, the Lord 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.”

Eternal life does not mean life until the end of time. It is not about quantity, but quality. Eternal life means a deep connection with the ageless and invincible values of the Kingdom of God. Eternal life describes the

quality of relationship between human beings and Christ, bringing us into a present knowledge and experience with the loving and living spirit of God.

As we consider our Lord's encounter with the man with many possessions, we can imagine Jesus' insight into his heart and soul. He had followed the specific, outward regulations that were spelled out in the Bible – but Jesus perceived that something still blocked him from total obedience to God – his many possessions. Material belongings stood in the way of his following Christ, because, having heard Jesus' opinion that he needed to give them up, he went away shocked and grieving, stunned and defeated – perhaps with a broken heart. He could not meet the ultimate measure of obedience to God. His love of possessions blocked him from totally loving God and following Christ.

Many scholars are quick to say that this is not necessarily a teaching by Jesus against a Christian's having material possessions, in whatever quantity. They remind us that the crisis for the man with many possessions was not how much he owned, but that the property owned him, blocking his way to unity with God.

Thinking about such views is a necessary beginning for each of us to examine in our own lives the relevance of today's Gospel story.

Would Jesus have said to another person, "One thing you lack," and then listed something quite different from selling possessions and giving the income to the poor? What does Jesus say to you and to me – about the one thing more that we lack? What do we need to give up, to rid ourselves of, to put behind us, that would allow us completely to follow Christ? What can blind us and deafen us from connecting with God?

What is the radical reorientation of our lives that will lead us to follow Christ? What is it that stands in the way of our becoming what God intends us to be?

It is almost certainly selfishness of one sort or another – because putting ourselves first puts God second or third. Because we do this, we become separated from the Holy Spirit's resources.

What is it that we need to give up in order to gain what is much more valuable? Is it greed or prejudice – ignorance or pride – anger or the need to control others, the inability to acknowledge our sins of hurting others or the "things we have left undone" or something else?

Or is it, after all, a love of possessions that stand in our way of connecting with the eternal life that we can find only in God? Is the fate of the man with many possessions at least in part potentially our fate? Is what stood in his way also at least in part what stands in our way, preventing us from totally connecting with God and following Christ?

We live in a culture of materialism in which we measure too much in monetary terms. We are inundated day after day, hour after hour, by advertising that insists that if we buy one thing or another that we will be

happier and better off. The push for more and more material possessions insinuates itself into our lives constantly.

For the majority of us who are not impoverished – for those who do not live with severely limited resources, this is a question we must examine.

An Anglican bishop from Africa once declared to an American audience that it was much easier for the Christians of his diocese to truly know God than for those living in the United States. This is so, he stated, because most in his diocese are very poor and that condition leads them to know the need for God in every way. This is so, because their prospects of becoming rich are so remote that they focus on deeper, more spiritual values.

Americans in contrast, he suggested, have a chance to gain nearly every material possession they want. So, we often become convinced, at least subconsciously, that we can buy happiness and meaning. This delusion can leave us void of the lasting, deep-down joy that possessions cannot bring.

Finally, it seems ironic that the man with many possessions asked about “inheriting” eternal life. The truth is, he had already inherited it – as a child of God. The God-within-him existed as a part of the created order – because he, like each of us, was created in the image and likeness of God. He had inherited God’s spirit already – he just didn’t know it. Jesus tried to open him to understanding that reality – to instruct him how to break through what blocked him from recognizing and utilizing the very spirit of God that he only had to put before all else in his life.

What must we do, what must we give up, in order to recognize and put to use the eternal life that each of us has inherited?

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