

# “Love Comes First...and Last”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – October 11, 2009*

Rev. John Wahl

Hebrews 4:12-16

Mark 10:17-31

The Beatles sang that they didn't care too much for money, because “money can't buy you love.” Their fellow countrywoman, Princess Diana, was quoted as saying this: “They say it is better to be poor and happy than rich and miserable, but how about a compromise like moderately rich and just moody?”<sup>1</sup>

Our first reading from Hebrews talks about the Word of God being living and active; that it is sharper than a two-edged sword; able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. All of us have times and places where God's word challenges us where we have doubts, seemingly cutting us to the bone. Jesus knows us because he lived among us and was tempted as we are – whether it be by money, or envy, or fame... Because Christ knows us, and loves us, he can also help us: by reassuring us that we do not have to rely on ourselves – with all of our doubts and our fears and our shortcomings – but instead can put our trust in Him.

And so, as we heard in our final verse in Hebrews, “let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

The story of the rich young ruler begins promisingly. He's obviously searching for something, why else would he be going to see Jesus – running up and kneeling before him? In asking Jesus, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” he admits that he needs something more than he already has in life – he wants also to take part in the life of God. He already is a follower of the commandments; he already has material possessions, but he realizes that he wants something more.

And yet, what he asks Jesus is a flawed question: he wants to know what else he can do to gain his inheritance. An inheritance is not something that can be earned – it was given. In the ancient world, there were no complicated wills; there was no rewarding the children who were more faithful or kind toward their parents – the story of the prodigal son teaches us this point – an inheritance was a gift received with grace; not a reward earned by actions.

In Mark, this man is introduced to us as simply a man. Later, in verse 22, we will find out that he is wealthy. He is called a “ruler” in Luke's gospel and “young” in Matthew. And so, in Christian tradition, he is often the “rich, young ruler.” But, for Mark – and for our purposes – he is just a man, a regular guy, although one with great possessions.

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted by Kate Huey in *Weekly Seeds*

Jesus suggests that if the man is really concerned about eternal life, then he should stop storing up treasures on earth and concentrate instead on treasures in heaven. “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor,” Jesus says. Thus, the question has been reframed: rather than being a matter about how to earn your way to heaven some day in the future, Jesus creates for this young man an opportunity for discipleship in the present, saying: “come, follow me.”

The insinuation, of course, is that failing to share your possessions, or – more precisely – being possessed by your own material wealth, is a violation of the commandments. But, “rather than condemning the ‘sin’ of the rich man, Jesus confronts him with his weakness, his captivity to possessions that prevents him from living a full life. Jesus names the ‘power’ that holds the man captive and invites him to step into freedom.”<sup>2</sup>

What happens next, we cannot be sure, for this is an open-ended story. Because we are told that the man goes away grieving, due to his many possessions, we – as readers of the story – assume that the man did not become a follower of Jesus. Later on, he may have had a change of heart, remembering why he approached Jesus in the first place, that he felt that a life based on his material wealth alone, was not complete.

But, what we do know is that Jesus loved him: Mark makes a point of telling us that. Having the ability to – as Hebrews says – “judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart,” Jesus loved this rich, young man. And nothing that he could do – whether indecision or an outright rejection of the suggestion to sell all he owned – would change Jesus’ love for him.

Jesus uses this encounter with the rich, young ruler who goes away grieving as a teaching moment with his disciples. He tells them how difficult it is for those with wealth to enter into the kingdom of God – as difficult as a camel going through the eye of a needle. Once again, Jesus is not speaking here about life after death, but about the reign of God that has been initiated with Christ’s coming. Jesus is speaking to them about the Kingdom of God here and now – about placing your trust not in your possessions, and not in yourself and your own abilities, but in God.

Later on in the book of Hebrews, we are instructed to “do good and share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” (13:16) It may be that for us, in our particular situation, with Jesus looking at us lovingly, giving everything away all at once would not be a practice of good stewardship. Jesus is talking about sharing what we have with others, even when it that is a difficult or risky thing to do: like the Samaritan who shares with his neighbor on the road, like the widow who gives generously even if it is not a large gift. Jesus is asking us to sacrifice what we have been given for the benefit of others.

When the disciples hear Jesus talking about the camel and the eye of the needle, when they hear Jesus say that for mortals, salvation is impossible, they become nervous. They are the faithful ones – they have given up at least a portion of their comfort and security in order to be

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Campbell in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 4

followers of Jesus. They have already made sacrifices: their time, their jobs, their families. Is all of this still impossible, even for them?

Jesus offers assurance that he has already given to them what he gave to the rich, young man – Jesus loves them. Of course, Jesus says it to them in a different way, because they already knew that he loved them; instead Jesus assures them that they will receive a hundred-fold return on their investment in him – through the sacrifices they have made. As they are transformed more and more into his own image, they will come to value even more the relationships that they have with family and friends. They will come to appreciate their houses and fields – their possessions – as they come to realize that these are not things that need to possess them. As the disciples “do good and share what they have,” their rewards on earth and in heaven will multiply because they will see the fruit of their labor manifest in the lives of others. They will learn to see the wisdom in the words of Jesus, that “it is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Acts 20:35)

David Howell says, “Life in the kingdom of God is about transformation and character change. With the demands and temptations of life bearing down upon us, we want to cry out like the disciples, “then who can be saved?” (v. 26) Who can live a kingdom life? How can I change? How can I take the necessary first steps?”<sup>3</sup>

The first step to a character change is to be with Jesus, to be in relationship with the God who created you and gifted you and loves you. Being in relationship with God, and living amid the people of God, teaches us that while change might come slowly, while we might resist giving away our possessions, or our need for independence, or our longing for security, or our fear of not having enough; “for God all things are possible.”

The young man might go away grieving, but he does not go away empty-handed.<sup>4</sup> He hears the answer that he is looking for – the knowledge of what is required for eternal life – and though he walks away sorrowful, he does not walk away without hope. The love of Jesus Christ goes with him. And who knows, after he spends a few days or a few years at home mulling over what Jesus has said, maybe he will come back. For, like the Father who awaits the return of his son, waiting to run and welcome the prodigal home, Jesus lovingly awaits for him to answer the call, “come, follow me.” AMEN.

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<sup>3</sup> David Howell in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 4

<sup>4</sup> Paul Wadell in *Christian Century*, Oct. 6, 2009