

Sermon

“Pursuing the Kingdom with Our Many Possessions”

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, October 10, 2021

20th Sunday after Pentecost

Heb. 4:12 Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

Heb. 4:14 Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. 16 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.

Mark 10:17 As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 18 Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 19 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.’” 20 He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” 21 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.” 22 When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Mark 10:23 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!” 24 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! 25 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.” 26 They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” 27 Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

Mark 10:28 Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” 29 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, 30 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. 31 But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

I. “If you read scripture and it doesn’t trouble you . . . you might want to read it again because this text is a troubling text which demands much.”

A. Perhaps that is never more true than when the scripture is addressing our wealth.

B. A subject studiously avoided in many religious communities because we feel in our gut that to talk about what is in a person’s bank account is to move “from preachin’ to meddlin’.”

C. And Hebrews speaks to this situation for us:

Heb. 4:12 Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

D. And Jesus picks up on the theme of speaking to uncomfortable realities when he asks for an uncompromising commitment to deploy our wealth for the good of others.

II. Setting the Scene

- A. Jesus has been answering questions for a while in Mark's gospel.**
- B. Has just finished saying that one must be childlike to enter into the Kingdom of God.**
 - 1. Full of wonder & enthusiasm & simple devotion**
- C. He is approached by an earnest and devout man,**
 - 1. “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”**

III. This man is not a bad person.

- A. In fact it appears that he is a knowledgeable and a sincere person of faith.**
 - 1. When Jesus lists some of the Torah instructions — he indicates that he has faithfully kept those instructions all his life.**
 - 2. I hear this and I already like this guy . . . he seems like the sort of person you'd be glad to have in your family or circle of friends.**
- B. Jesus likes him too! In fact Mark tells us that Jesus held him in his gaze lovingly.**
 - 1. It is important to note that, because when Jesus gives him the next step to take — Jesus is not admonishing him.**
 - 2. He is speaking truth in love to someone he cares about.**

“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.”

C. He lacks only one thing — to be set free from the entanglements of his affluence.

22 When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

IV. The “one thing lacking,” as it turns, out was the hardest thing to think about doing.

A. In the ancient world (as in ours) *many* people associate financial success with “blessing.”

B. And even further we tend to assume that affluence is a reward for our having been good and faithful people.

1. No wonder this man is “shocked” and “grieving” because Jesus has just called into question those assumptions about wealth and faithfulness.

C. There are still many preachers who are preaching a “prosperity gospel” in our world. They are the ones in huge homes, with satellite TV ministries, and who are occasionally asking their followers for money to buy a new private jet.

1. But before we dismiss them for the caricature that they are, let us notice how *successful* they are at what they do.

2. Clearly, *many* of us are buying what they are selling.

V. My encounter with Father Christian @ Mepkin Abbey

A. “You know, your affluence will not make you happy — but it just might keep you comfortably in your unhappiness.”

B. Like the proverbial frog in slowly heating water — our affluence keeps us warm and cozy even as we are heading to our doom.

- 1. Our affluence keeps us just comfortable enough that we do not reach that place of discomfort where we are *so dissatisfied* with our life that we do what is necessary to change it.**

C. I have come to think of my own affluence in the way the Screwtape thinks of any sin in general.

- 1. *The Screwtape Letters* - Letter 12 dedicated to encouraging Wormwood to stop trying to rack-up really impressive sins and learn to play the long-game in winning the patient's soul for his father below.**
- 2. Screwtape has just offered a long list of distractions with which Wormwood may keep him from his prayers . . .**

You will say that these are very small sins; and doubtless, like all young tempters, you are anxious to be able to report spectacular wickedness. But do remember, the only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the Enemy. It does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one —the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts, Your affectionate uncle SCREWTAPE

Lewis, C. S.. *The Screwtape Letters* (pp. 60-62). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition. (Conclusion of Letter 12)

D. The monastic idea of simplicity versus affluence...

- 1. Affluence - you always need more/bigger boxes**

2. simplicity - you *choose* to have one, small box.
- E. All in service to the idea that you have more than you need and so can share ungrudgingly.
- F. The “Protestant Work-ethic” which many of us had drummed into us since our childhoods . . . was *meant* to be the path to an economically workable social-order:
 1. Calvin understood that we would, by working diligently, produce more than we needed and he and the other reformers anticipated (we must say naively) that people would then deploy their excess capital to aid the circumstance of the poor.
 2. Many of us read the memo far enough to make the connection between hard-work and excess capital...
 3. But we stopped reading short of the imperative to then give that excess back to the community in which we live so that all might have “enough.”

VI. In the wake of the exchange with this earnest petitioner Jesus turns to his disciples to teach . . .

Mark 10:23 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!” 24 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! 25 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.”

- A. Entering the KoG is *difficult!*
- B. It’s even *more difficult* when we are entangled in our affluence.

VII. So what are *we* to *do*?

- A. We who like this man are earnestly trying to be faithful — Are also like him in that we know Jesus asks us to be generous *because he loves us*
- B. After we get over the shock of Jesus' expectations
 1. We take a *first step* toward the KoG.
- C. For most of us that will not be are dramatic as “*sell what you own* and give the money to the poor.”
 1. Most of us will need to *grow into* our new commitment to generosity.
- D. As I have been preparing messages in support of this year's stewardship campaign I find myself asking some questions:
 1. “How can I be more generous?”
 - † In part, for me, this requires that I be *less calculating* and *more compassionate*.
- E. Presbyterians as a whole appear to give between 2% and 3% of our income to the work of the church.
 1. So the average Presbyterian is about $\frac{1}{3}$ of the way to the standard of a “tithe.”
 2. “How can I let my percentage grow annually until I am tithing?”
 - a. If we were to make 1% increases each year, it will take less than a decade to reach our goal and we will have done it gently.

- F. If you have not already received your stewardship packet for the Fall-campaign, it should arrive very soon.**
- 1. I hope that you will review the pages we're sent you and prayerfully wonder what your response will be.**
 - 2. We've included a "step-up" chart and an appeal that everyone consider the increase they are able to make for 2022.**
 - 3. Your pastor has spent this past week putting some of his financial life in order so that he can be more generous and I hope you will do the same.**

VIII. My baptism in Circular Church in Charleston

- A. I was brought into the life of faith in one of the oldest churches in Charleston.**
- 1. By the time I arrived in 1965 - the building has long since been paid for.**
 - 2. I was the beneficiary of other people's generosity.**
- B. We too worship and pray and conduct our ministry in a place that has largely been provided to us through the generosity of those who came before.**
- C. Now it is our turn to take up the noble cause of making sure that this congregation and this church facility remain financially strong so that those who follow us will have the benefits of this sanctuary and this congregation's ministries.**

D. So I invite you in the coming weeks as we approach Stewardship Sunday to prayerfully contemplate the measure of your generosity and to do what you can to strengthen our church.