

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

Psalm 22:1-15

Hebrews 4:12-16

Mark 10:17-31

One of the fascinating realities of growing older is that at some point we have to come face-to-face with our 'stuff'not just our emotional life, but the material things that decorate our homes, hang in our closets to clothe us, mementoes and gifts given to us that express someone's love for us, photographs of people and places that are important to us, and physical representations of defining moments in our lives. Each of these physical things brings back certain memories or times of great joy. They jog our memory and remind us of long-forgotten loves or accomplishments. Our stuff represents who we are. It is part of our identity. We are hard pressed and reluctant to give it up. If we part with all the physical representations of our lives and identities, does that mean that our lives and our identities are of no merit? If we can't see or hold the physical object, does that mean that these things never happened? Does that mean that we are no longer who we have always believed ourselves to be? All of us in this culture struggle with our 'stuff.'

These physical representations may define our identity throughout of lives and our sense of belonging to a certain community or group, but what about our Christian identity? What constitutes the essence of Christian belonging and identity? That's exactly the issue this morning when the young man confronts Jesus with the question "What do I need to do to inherit eternal life?" He explains to Jesus that he has been a law-abiding and faithful Jew all his life. When Jesus recounts the commandments to him, he assures Jesus that he has kept all of them. This young man is a good Jew...a good person. Why wouldn't he be able to look forward to entering the kingdom of God?

Jesus' answer is rather startling and difficult to accept. "Go sell all that you own and give the money to the poor and then come and follow me." The young man reacts much the same way I can imagine that I might react. He must be standing there thinking, "That's the craziest thing I've ever heard!!" He was shocked and went away grieving because he had many possessions. Why does Jesus tell them that it will be hard for those who have wealth to enter into the kingdom of heaven? Isn't wealth a signal that God has blessed the receiver? Don't we thank God for the financial windfall that saves the day? Don't we say to ourselves and to others who are materially comfortable: These are God's blessings! If God blesses us with riches and material comfort then why would God make it hard for the rich to enter into the kingdom of

heaven? Perhaps we've got it wrong. Perhaps our material wealth is not connected to God's blessings or love for us at all. Perhaps the two are in no way connected. That doesn't mean that God doesn't love the rich. It's simply important to entertain the idea that God does not necessarily show love by bestowing financial stability. Perhaps God knows that the financial stability actually gets in the way of our becoming disciples and leaving our lives and following Jesus.

Well, if financial well-being is not necessarily a sign of God's love and blessing, then what does it mean? In terms of our own definitions, financial stability can provide a sense of security in meeting our daily needs. We know that we can pay the bills. That feels good and we pat ourselves on the back. And financial stability may mean that we have some power and influence that we would not have without it. Power and influence are always pleasant to have at our disposal. Maybe financial stability means that we are self-sufficient. We can feel proud of ourselves. We don't need anyone else because we can take care of ourselves...and our family as well if we have one. Security, power, influence, self-esteem....all of these are ours when we are financially secure. And having done all of this on our own, we tend not to think of ourselves as being dependent upon God. That's a huge stumbling block. Wealth lures us into believing that we can and provide our own safety. It's easy for us to fall into the trap of believing that our own accomplishments assure us of well-being in this life. And we haven't needed to trust our well-being to God. We can do it ourselves. That's a huge trap to fall into and one from which we may not be able to extricate ourselves.

Having financial stability may also trigger in us that phenomenon of feeling that 'enough' is not really enough. If we have plenty, wouldn't it be better if we had even more? If we believe that God fills up our bank account because He loves us, wouldn't we feel more love if we had a bigger bank account? Wouldn't we feel safer if we knew that we couldn't possibly be wiped out financially? All it takes is 'more.' This phenomenon of feeling that 'enough' is not really enough is also known as 'greed.' When we take a bigger slice of the pie than we need, someone else is not getting enough. In terms of the economy, it is a zero-sum game. If some people have too much, then others are not getting enough. What happens then to our sense of feeling connected to the community? Isn't community what Jesus and God are all about? Jesus teaches us about how much God loves the poor, the infirm, the lame, and the left-out. Jesus connects life in God's eternal presence...the kingdom of God...with communal justice. Everybody has enough and no one has too much. Jesus actually spelled it out for us in the Sermon on the Mount when he gave us the beatitudes.

The grieving young man...unwilling and unable to give up all his worldly goods...wants to know what he can do in order to inherit eternal life. He's forgotten that an inheritance is a gift. It's

not something that is earned. Eternal life is a blessed gift from God to all who love God and depend on God and acknowledge their need for God. One inherits the kingdom of God. One doesn't 'earn' it.

The reassuring message from Jesus in this scripture passage is the statement that "It is easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." There's Good News buried in that sentence because Jesus follows it with the words, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." And God has shown us over and over again through the events in the life of Jesus Christ, that God makes possible the impossible: when Jesus restores sick or dead children to a healthy life; when Jesus enables a blind man to see and a lame man to walk; when a destitute woman gives her very last might for the welfare of the Temple and others; when Jesus heals the woman filled with faith when she touches the hem of his garment; when Jesus calms the raging waters of the sea; and when Jesus deep in prayer receives from the Father enough strength to give his life for the sake of others...all others...including us.

Perhaps the better question for us is an introspective one not addressed to Jesus, but one that we address to ourselves: What am I *not* willing to do...even for Jesus...to be part of the kingdom of heaven? When we can answer that question, we can deepen our relationship with God and our relationship and trust in Jesus Christ.

And with God's help we will.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.