

Mark 10:17-31

It's been a little over 9 years since I went to Zimbabwe, Africa and I am still affected by the poverty I witnessed there, the stark contrast between the haves and the have nots. Yet the people in the villages we visited were happy, they had a joy that only comes from knowing that this earth is a temporary home. We talked about this in our Bible study last Thursday, that when we have too much material comfort, we can become complacent in our hope for our eternal home with God. An American existence, even the semi-poor in our country, is luxurious compared to the standards of living in much of the rest of the world. The majority of us listening today are far more comfortable than the poor in our country.

How much of what you own, cars, clothing, home, any material goods you can think of, how much of what you own truly addresses and helps you to grow spiritually? Speaking personally, I have far too much stuff. My most comfortable chair may be considered a detriment to my spiritual life because it is too comfortable and I fall asleep in it. To be even bolder about things that hinder our spiritual growth, what activities, other than attending church, build our spiritual life? I know I play way too many games on my phone that do absolutely nothing to build my spiritual life. There are other activities that you may have that aren't doing anything for your spiritual life. However, some of these activities may boost your mental health, so I'm not telling you to stop them, I'm just asking you to consider where your spiritual growth is taking place.

However, when we have something that gets in the way of our relationship with God it is not worth the comfort derived from it considering what we are losing in the long run. Jesus says so in today's gospel reading from Mark. When he says it will be difficult for a rich person to enter the dominion of heaven he's talking about us. That's not an easy thing to hear.

Barbara Owen in an article in Lutheran Witness reminds us that, "Psalm 62:10 tells us: 'Though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them.' In his discussion of this verse, Luther states, 'Even if you should become rich justly and with God's help, do not depend on this either, and do not make mammon (material wealth) your god. Property is not given to you for you to build your trust upon or boast about, all of which is vanity and nothing, but for you to use, enjoy and share with others.' Luther went on to warn, 'Possessions belong in your hands, not in your heart'" (Owen, Barbara, Lutheran Witness. July 1999). When we built our memories of someone through their possessions they have handed down to us, it is hard to keep the possession out of our heart. Nonetheless, there is a time for us to give up the possession and hold onto the memory. I can't help but think of the people in Florida who have lost everything this past week. They had no choice but to give up their possessions.

It is hard to imagine life without possessions. Yet, we truly only need the basics. We don't need to purchase the most expensive items. With a little shopping savvy, we can find what is suitable to meet our needs at the lowest price. We don't need to "keep up with the Jones". Also, It is very difficult for the rich to enter the dominion of God because wealth brings so many distractions. Wealth can bring so many opportunities to get distracted from the things of God. There are less distractions if you are truly poor. Most of us, though, even the semi-poor in our country, own too many things that get in the way of God.

Think about the amount of time you spend studying the Bible or in prayer. Compare that to the amount of time you spend watching TV, playing cards, playing electronic games, shopping, or even reading. Our priorities get mixed up. How many of our young people have

we lost to Sunday morning sports? When was the last time you told a friend, "I'm sorry, I can't do that because it's my Bible study time." I think the American way is to accept the friend's request and skip the Bible study. Where are our priorities?

It's easy for us to be sad and critical about the rich man who approached Jesus, but we need to look at our own priorities as well. The media is full of examples of the wrong priorities. The show *Survivor* is a good example. It is a popular show that endorses winning millions instead of having integrity in our friendships. One of the shows Bill and I watch *Press Your Luck*, shows how people can win hundreds of thousands of dollars only to lose it because they are enticed by greed. I know the majority of you hearing this aren't going to be on *Survivor* or *Press Your Luck*, but the principle is there... Americans are being conditioned to place less value on relationships and more value on wealth.

Intuitively we know that we should deny the excess in our lives, that when there is too much, when that is all there is to life, it brings misery. The Jewish Talmud, the authority on Jewish law, brings wisdom on this matter. "Sin is sweet in the beginning, but bitter in the end." The outcome of lives dedicated to sin is ultimately bitter, even if such goodies seem sweet. It's bitter because we've seen such preoccupations close the door to God.

Martin Luther explained the perils of a concentration on wealth, how this focus on the things of the world distorts our faith. He says: "Many a person thinks he has God and everything he needs when he has money and property; in them he trusts and of them he boasts so stubbornly and securely that he cares for no one. Surely such a man also has a god---mammon is its name, that is, money and possessions... the desire for wealth clings and cleaves to our nature all the way to the grave" (*The Book of Concord*, pp. 365-366).

Jesus says that even those of us who are or feel poor will have a difficult time getting into the dominion of God because even though we might not have wealth, we want it so badly we can taste it... taste it even more than our hunger for the things of God and God's dominion. How do we get there... how do we get the things that have sinfully preoccupied us out of the way? It is true that Jesus promises salvation to those who renounce the things of the world in such a way that it almost seems like you have to do something to be saved. Listen to verses 29-30 "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 his follow up claim in verse 31 that the last will be first implies that we need not bring anything to him to be saved. Jesus teaches us to rely on the grace of God alone.

When we see how we let all sorts of things get in our way of loving God, we come to rely on grace. Martin Luther profoundly describes the nature of this wonderful God of ours who is always ready to provide this amazing grace: "He is an eternal fountain which overflows with sheer goodness and pours forth all that is good in name and in fact" (*The Book of Concord*, p. 368). When we encounter the eternal fountain who is always pouring out forgiving love on us, things begin to change. Like an early church father Clement of Alexandria said, we begin to use indifferent things like material wealth rightly and properly, withdrawing our emotional investments in them.

We need God's forgiving grace in order for us to take our sin seriously, to get things out of the way, and to get our priorities right. Yes, it will be tough for us rich folks to get to the dominion of God, but God works miracles all the time. The more you focus on Jesus, the less wealth will matter, the more we'll get our priorities straight. All glory be to God.