

Season of Pentecost - Stewardship & Generosity (Week 2)

August 25/26, 2018

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Psalm 51:10-12; Mark 10: 17-31

Grace to you and peace from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. “If you found yourself apprehensive listening to the reading of the gospel lesson . . . if you felt troubled by Jesus stark command to the man to sell it all . . . if you’re not sure you want to know what this might have to do with you . . . if you wait warily to hear what on earth I will have to say about it all, then you have heard God’s Word and heard rightly. Fannie Crosby might have us sing, “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine,” but Mark’s accompaniment to his gospel would more likely be “Blessed disturbance, Jesus is mine!”¹ This story intends to disturb because Jesus tells the truth and desperately wishes that we settle for no less than abundant life with God. It reminded me of a joke:

A lone hiker slips off a cliff. As he was falling, he was able to grab hold of a branch sticking out of the hillside. As he dangled there, he began to call out, “Hey! Is there anybody up there who can help?”

Soon the man heard a voice saying, “Yes. This is God, and I will help you.

The man was so relieved and said, “OK, God. What do you want me to do?”

God said, “Let go of the branch and I’ll catch you.”

The man looked down at how very far a drop it was, looked up and yelled, “Is there anyone else up there who can help?”

A man runs up to Jesus and asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The man seems eager and earnest as he humbly kneels before Jesus. In a moment he will acknowledge that he has lived faithfully, following God’s commands, yet still he seems to sense a need for something more. The man looks to Jesus in his search

for that missing something. Jesus looks at this zealous, sincere man and loved him. Loved him! Don't miss that important part of the action — Jesus looked at the man and loved him. “You want the treasures of heaven? Then you have to let go of what you've put your trust in and trust in me,” Jesus says. Let go of the branch and I'll catch you. And the man went away shocked and grieving. Only then do we learn that he had many possessions. Jesus' disciples were equally astounded. They had been raised to think that wealth was a sign of God's approval and favor. So if this guy doesn't have a reserved seat on the glory train, “then who can be saved?” Jesus tells us, “For [all] mortals it *is* impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” (Mk 10: 27b)

What must *we* do to get eternal life? The basic Lutheran 101 answer is we don't “do” — God does. Eternal life --- the kingdom of God, salvation, and the undeserved, unconditional love of God ---- is not earned, acquired, bought or negotiated. Eternal life is a gift from God, confirmed by the death and resurrection of Jesus ---- a gift to be received in faith. We are not saved by works but by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and even the faith is a gift given through the Holy Spirit. We can't earn a gift or something that is already ours. So why such a difficult command like “sell it all, give it to the poor and follow me?” The answer seems to be this:”How can you accept God's gift if your hands are full? How can you make room for it if your rooms are already filled?” How can you follow Jesus, if you're not free to go? ²

You see, this eternal life we're given is not just about life after death. That **will** be the longer part of our eternal life but eternity with God began at our Baptism. You're already living in the gift of eternal life now. You have God's love and eternal acceptance now! But "so what?" if you treat it like a gift to be left in the box or hidden in a closet, only brought out for display on Sundays or when certain people come to visit. Jesus is looking, loving us NOW and saying, with great excitement and joy, "Open it --- please open it --- I can't wait for you to open it." Because our LORD, who lived in the temptations and trials of human life, knows what freedom and glorious living awaits us when we live in God's gift of grace, our inherited eternal life each and every day.

When living in God's gift of grace, we are free from using our life to amass possessions, win the world's approval and garner power over others. We're free to care about more than ourselves — Jesus didn't just tell the man to get rid of his wealth but to "sell what you have and give it to the poor." Living in God's gift of grace, we are free to imagine fresh ways of living. We're freed to wonder what God is up to and to hope and to seek how God can use our time, resources, talents to bring about the fullness of God's kingdom and love in our families, workplace, church and community. Our lives --- all eternity --- are in the hands of One who may be trusted, One for whom all things are possible. And that Lord loves you and will walk with you now and right into eternity. In God's gift of grace, your value, identity, lovable-ness, gifted-ness are already a certainty. You need not be a slave or pawn to what the world would have you think about yourself and your achievements and

worth. What would it be like to live in such freedom? What might we do, whom might we help, where may we go, what love might be released if we walk in God's grace?

Still ---- Sell what you have, give the money to the poor and follow me? Is it really possible? Another pastor surprised me when he wrote this about today's Gospel:

"[Please note]: Jesus doesn't give a time line. Jesus just tells the truth. And the truth is we cannot "take it with us." In fact, Jesus gives us a vivid image of the fact that we cannot "take it with us." He said it is as likely to find a "rich man" in the kingdom of God, as it is to find a lumpy, grumpy old camel sliding through the eye of a needle. Forgetaboutit! We all have to "give it away." No one can take one cent with us. The only question is, when will we give it away, and to whom will we give it? How will we accomplish that inevitable end of giving it all away, and where will our wealth go?³ Including our wealth of talents and love!

Columnist, Erma Bombeck wrote she imagined being asked to empty her pockets as she entered heaven and being asked, "What have you got left? Any unfulfilled promises? Any unused talents that we gave you when you were born that you still have left? Any unsaid compliments or bits of love that you haven't spread around?" And she hoped she would turn her pockets inside out and be able to answer, "I've nothing to return. I spent everything you gave me. I'm as naked as the day I was born."⁴

In our gospel today, Jesus is not attacking goods or praising poverty. Jesus is asking what are we clinging to so tightly that we can't receive God's grace that transforms us? Jesus is clear that wealth and all its accompanying security, power

and insulation is a danger his followers will face. But there are other branches we might be clinging to as well — worry, perfectionism, resentments or addictions. What do we have our sights set on so intently that we can't see the LORD cheering us on to freedom, love and mission? Are we going to arrive at death with our pockets still full of God's grace, unopened possibilities, unused love, and regrets? It's not a question of heaven or hell. It's a matter of true life or living a lesser imitation of it.

Jesus looks at us, loves us way too much to have us waste life on what is not important. As much as it may disturb and make us squirm, Jesus says let go of whatever else is driving, draining or diminishing your life and open my gifts now, follow me now and live in the freedom of my grace now. Live like you've never lived before. Approach the throne of grace with boldness and receive mercy and find what you need. I'll catch you. And we'll walk together, Jesus promises, and arrive in eternity with well worn hearts and empty pockets and rejoicing that will last forever. What do you say? What do I say? We'll need to decide each day and some times more than once a day if we will lay down whatever is getting in the way of receiving all our Lord wants to give. Even if it seems too hard, remember Jesus says, "For [all] mortals it *is* impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." (Mk 10: 27b) Jesus is looking. Jesus is loving. Jesus is waiting. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri

ENDNOTES

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1. Play on lyrics from Patrick J. Willson in his sermon “Blessed Disturbance” as posted on www.GoodPreacher.com
 2. Barbara Brown Taylor as quoted by John M. Buchanan in his sermon, “Give It All,” Lectionary Homiletics, Oc/Nov, 2003 p 16.
 3. Leonard Sweet, “L4G Live for God” Leonard Swweet Sermons, ChristianGlobe Network, inc., 2012, 0-000-1415
 4. Paraphrased from Erma Bombeck as quoted by John M. Buchanan in his sermon, “Give It All,” Lectionary Homiletics, Oc/Nov, 2003 p 16.