Sermon for The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, October 14, 2018
Text: Mark 10:17-31
Title: From wealth to wealth

There’s a man born and raised in Los Altos Hills, the wealthiest community in the most powerful country in the world, who had never really wanted for anything. He had kind and loving parents. He went to great school, excelled at sports, volunteered. He was honest and hardworking, and eventually found himself in a lucrative career in tech. He did everything he could to be a good person and lead a good life. But as he grew older he began to notice a gnawing emptiness within, an inexplicable dissatisfaction that ran deep.

At first, he tried to run from it. He worked harder. Worked our hard. Found himself enjoying a little more wine and Haagen Daaaz than usual. But he was self-aware enough to realize this would not get him far. Never much for religion, he was surprised to fin himself drawn to the spiritual. He signed up for a yoga class and joined a meditation group, got himself into therapy and spent weekends at Esalen, and it helped, but he still felt like something was missing.

And then, one Saturday while hiking at Rancho, he ran into an old friend from High School. They had never been that close but the man was feeling more and more desperate, so he shared his struggle, his frustration, his growing despair, while the friend listened patiently, knowingly, lovingly, and finally said, “I hear you. And I’ve been there. Let me tell you about someone.”

I wonder if that is how it went for the man in today’s Gospel, if this is a bit like what led up to his running to Jesus, out of the blue, kneeling before him, and saying, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Had he run out of other good ideas? Other places to turn? “Good Teacher,” he practically begs, “for the love of God, help me. I don’t know what to do next, but what I have been doing is getting me nowhere.”

Jesus, as usual, points the young man back to the Hebrew Scriptures, more specifically the commandments, but only the last six. Notably missing are the first four, the foundational four, concerned not with our behavior but God’s holiness: that we have no other God, don’t make idols, do not make wrongful use of God’s name, and honor the Sabbath. Upon hearing this, I imagine the man’s hope might have flickered a bit. Not the same old stuff! Not this again! I
thought he was going to show me something new. But, desperate, he perseveres. “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.”

And Jesus sees his angst, his agony. Sees him ripe and ready to grow. But Jesus also knows how hard that next step will be. And seeing him in this transition, caught between an old life he has outgrown and a new life that will come at great cost, Jesus is filled with compassion. He loves the young man – his distress, his striving, his hungry heart. He loves him, and so he continues, “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.” We never find out what the man does - only that he receives this much longed for invitation as many of us probably would: it grieves him, for he had many possessions.

Of all the topics Jesus addresses in his earthly ministry, there are two that stand out for their sheer frequency: the kingdom of God, and money. Think about that for a moment. God, out of God’s great love for all creation, God’s longing for reconciliation, God’s unfailing commitment to our salvation, takes on flesh to walk among us, and what does God want to talk about? Politics and economics. Not prayer or personal piety. Not the kids or the weather. Not even our spirituality, vocations, and worship life. (You know, the Churchy stuff.) It’s not that Jesus doesn’t care about these things – he does. He cares deeply. But he also understands that it is impossible to flourish in sick systems and sick communities, when our lives are driven by sick assumptions about what it means to be human, like that more is always better, that we can be reduced to what we do, that our worth is tied to our wealth, that exploitation and oppression are inevitable. Jesus meets us where we are, in our sleeping and shopping and stressing and speaking and spending, people of infinite possibility embedded in patters and places that nevertheless limit our imaginations.

In his wonderfully insightful 2016 book, Money and Possessions, theologian Water Brueggeman identifies six distinct theses, or recurring themes, from scripture concerning money and possessions: 1) that they are gifts from God; 2) they are rewards for obeying God; 3) they belong to God and we hold them in trust; 4) they are sources of social injustice; 5) they are to be shared in a neighborly way; and, finally, 6) they are seductions that lead to idolatry. Today’s Gospel fits well into that last one. The problem for the wealthy man is not that he owns many possessions. It is that he is attached to his many possessions. He has made an idol of them,

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seeking in money and things the security that can only truly come from God. This is why Jesus leaves those first four commandments out – they are the man’s blind spot. He is looking to himself to secure his salvation, define himself, establish his value, through what he can make, earn, and do – checking off that list of commandments, accomplishments, and awards, trying to earn what only God can give, and which God chooses gives freely.

So it is important to really hear what Jesus encourages him to do. In telling him to go and sell all that he has, give the money to the poor, and follow him, Jesus is not telling the man to be a beggar. He is not telling him to impoverish himself. He is not even calling him into uncertainty – he literally outlines a way forward. Instead, he is inviting him into a new life. A life that is, actually, much more secure than his old one, built on foundations deeper and more abiding than all the money and all the things he could ever acquire for himself. It is an invitation from one kind of wealth to another. An invitation into eternal life here and now. A life of total presence with God in community. A miraculous life, where a handful of loaves feed thousands and no one’s needs ever go unfulfilled.

As we begin our Stewardship season, a few weeks set aside each year to reflect on how we are called to support and sustain the life of this parish, this is also a time when we reflect more generally on one of Jesus’ primary concerns: how we relate faithfully to our stuff, our money, our sources of wealth and stability. How free we really are in relationship to them. And from where – or who – our security ultimately comes. That we are talking about money now in the year is somewhat pragmatic (the vestry will have to start working on our 2019 budget soon, and your donations are our primary source of income) but that we are talking about money at all is simply us following Jesus’ lead.

Every so often I look back over the last few months of my preaching to see what questions and concerns seem to be coming up over and over again. As I did this recently, I noticed how often I tell stories from my own life. It’s important, from time to time, for me to say that I don’t do this because my life has been so uniquely interesting (it hasn’t) or because I have been so uniquely faithful (I haven’t). I tell stories from my life because it is the life story I know best, the one closest to me, and I have learned not only from the wisdom of our tradition but my own experience that it is in the ordinary, extraordinary stuff of our daily lives that God meets us, speaks to us, loves us, and invites us into eternal life. So when I share a story from my own experience, my hope – my intention – is that it will move you to think about the story you know
best – your life - and notice where God is meeting you in the ordinary, extraordinary stuff of everyday existence - speaking to you, loving you, inviting you into eternal life.

And because we do not have a “spiritual” life that is distinct from the wholeness of our lives, God, out of God’s love for us, speaks to the wholeness, encountering us as people who own and spend and work and give and save and invest and donate and receive. People striving in all parts of our lives – including our financial lives - to be faithful disciples. It is simply because this is a part of our lives that it is also a part of our lives in God. But there’s another reason I think telling our stories is so important, even and especially those stories that touch on topics that are hard to broach in our wider culture – money, death, embodiment, shame, doubt, faith - and that is because it is precisely what God did in the life of Jesus.

Think of it like this. Avram was the CEO of a highly successful chemical factory in Israel. One day, there was a terrible explosion on the line that tragically killed two employees. Avram responded swiftly and compassionately. He did everything right – cared for families, dedicated resources to investigating what went wrong, and invested in the changes necessary to make the plant safer than it had ever been. But when the time came to reopen, many of the workers were too scared to return. They had lost their friends in that accident, they had been too close. With a reduced workforce, and a tentative one at best, productivity declined. So Avram made a decision. He resigned as CEO and took a job on the line, right where the explosion had taken place. He realized that even though his employees knew in their minds that it was safe to come back, they had been captured by their fear. They couldn’t see the situation clearly. What looked perfectly safe to him looked dangerous to them. With Avram working overtime, the other employees slowly returned and productivity went up. Ten years later the company was one of the largest in Israel, much more profitable than it had been before the accident.²

Working on the line didn’t feel like a risk to Avram, but in order to inspire his employees he had to show them – not tell them, but show them – that he was willing himself to do what he was asking of them. He had to model the way forward. This is what God does for us in Jesus: God gives us someone we can touch, see, hold, cry with, yell at, run toward, run from, as we wrestle with how to live into eternal life here and now - an invitation before us always yet often clouded by our attachments and fears.

God knows that what God is asking of the rich young man – and of us - is not easy; that letting go of our anxiety and our attachments will feel threatening and unsettling. But God also knows that we have nothing to fear; that a richer, more fulfilling life await us if he will only step forward in trust. And God knows this because that is precisely what God did in the life of Jesus: to give of God’s own self freely, lavishly, prodigally, for what at first appears an unimaginable future. It may feel daunting to step out in trust, but in the end, this is a choice that will more than pay off. Amen.