

Trinity Episcopal Cathedral
October 11, 2009 - The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” What must I do to inherit eternal life... right away, I want to mention that this text is not about getting into Heaven. Even though this phrase...“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” may sound like “What must I do to get into Heaven?,” that is not what this text is speaking of. The phrase that has been translated here - “eternal life,” - is a Greek rendering of the Hebrew notion, of the Age to Come. So the original thought is: “What must I do to be part of the Age To Come?” And you might remember in the very beginning of Mark’s Gospel, the first words of Jesus’ public ministry are: “The Kingdom of God is near.” The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent. Change your way of thinking. Go beyond the constructs that you think are possible. Receive this Good News! The Kingdom of God is here. It has begun. The time is fulfilled. Come and participate in it.

So when the question is asked: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”...the question is really: “What must I do to be part of the Kingdom of God?” What must I do to participate in the passion of God, that would transform this world, so that it would look like what the world would look like if God were King. If this were God’s Kingdom, what would it look like? A place of justice, and kindness, and walking with integrity with your God. A place where all know that they are equal in the sight of God...and loved...and cherished...and that every human life is equally important. Good Teacher...what must I do, to be part of this? What must I do, to follow you in that way. For Jesus was an embodiment of what a human life would look like, a human life full of God. And His works and deeds and teachings are all about a transformed world...what the passion of God longs for, on our earth.

I want to comment about Jesus’ harsh words about wealth in this passage. He says: “It will be hard for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom on God.” And the story says how perplexed...and shocked...and upset the hearer was, to have Jesus say this. And let me give you a little bit of context for this. Conventional wisdom, in the first-century world, suggested that the righteous shall prosper. We’ve heard that--surely the righteous shall prosper. Listen to a couple of verses from Proverbs, a Wisdom passage in the Scriptures: “The righteous...being righteous and prosperous and wealthy, is a blessing, for those who chose the right path.” That’s from Proverbs. Or how about this one? “In the house of the righteous, there is much treasure. But trouble befalls the income of the wicked. One who is humble, and fears the Lord, is full of riches and honor, and good life.” And how about this: “A slack hand causes poverty. Diligent hands make for the rich.” In other words, the wealthy deserve their wealth, because they’ve made good decisions, and this is due them. Whereas the poor... they too, deserve their poverty, because of their decisions...or their lack of diligence.

Now this conventional first-century wisdom, I daresay, has even trickled down to our day. I think many of us still have the notion that it is the righteous who prosper. But Jesus spoke strongly against this. He spoke against the conventional wisdom of His day, that suggested that the wealthy and privileged deserve it, and that the poor...that some-

how they've made poor decisions, or that there's wickedness in the camp. Jesus says No...this is not the way of the Kingdom of God. There are systems that have perpetuated injustice. There are reasons why we are not all equal. And Jesus implores us to change our ways, and to look at how we can change our world, so that all of us will know our dignity and our identity in the presence of God...that we are all deeply valued and cherished. So when Jesus says how hard it will be for those to have wealth, to enter the Kingdom of God...the conventional hearer in Jesus' day,--and certainly the hearer in this Gospel--was confused. Because for him, his own wealth was a sign, one more sign, of his righteousness and goodness. And Jesus says it is really not so.

The other dimension of being wealthy, in the first-century world...in first century, the top one and two percent, held basically all the wealth. And the whole system in the first-century world, was structured so that the peasants, who worked hard to till the land, and produce its fruits...that went to help support the top one and two percent...and the structures around that (which include the temple, incidentally). So, if you were wealthy, it was apparent that you were in collaboration with a domination system that was not just. So you were in collusion with the authorities, if you were part of the wealthy elite, because that's just the way that things were structured. So...that's a double indictment from Jesus: if you are wealthy, you're complicit with an unjust system in the first-century world. How hard it will be for you, to enter into the making of a Kingdom of God.

These are hard sayings. And for those of us today...some of this conventional wisdom, we may still have in our minds. We may, or may not, feel complicit with injustices--those of us who are well-off, and who are privileged. That is for us to discern, I think. I want to make a caveat about the issue of wealth. Wealth is not altogether bad. In fact, those of us who are privileged, and who have been able to do well in this world, financially...we have choices to make. What kind of choices do we make, in terms of the distribution of our own wealth, and resources, and gifts and talents, for the common good? To help to change the system, so that they are about justice, and fairness, and kindness. We can make decisions about that, and that is part of our call, as Christians. So I wanted to take a few minutes to say a little bit about wealth...as it was understood in the first-century world...because Jesus says a lot about wealth in all of the Gospels. It has come across especially strongly in this Gospel today. And it's important that we reflect on our use of wealth, as well.

But now, I want to return to the Gospel story. "Good Teacher, what must I do, to be part of the Kingdom of God?" To embody the passion and values of God, to help transform this world. What can I do, to participate in change that will also transform myself? So that I can be a more authentic, and fully alive human being. What must I do? That is the question that is before each and every one of us today. What must I do to follow you, Jesus? What must I do to be part of this world of possibilities and hope. Jesus looked intently, at the man in our Gospel story today. And I suggest that He is looking intently, at us, as well. What does He see? He looks at us lovingly, as He always does. What does He see?

In the Gospel, the word that came was..."you lack one thing"... "you lack one thing." There is something in your way, that keeps you from being a full participant in the King-

dom of God...or in a transformed life. What is that one thing? Perhaps it's a belief that you have...even about God. Perhaps some of our notions about God make us too afraid to be vulnerable, and reflect on our self-understanding, or even our sense of what we think is possible in the world. Perhaps our beliefs about God have actually got us frightened...and questioning are we really worthy to have something fresh and new happen to us... Maybe it's time for us to relinquish some of our beliefs about God, but it may feel like,"But I'm giving away everything I have!" I'm selling everything if I do that. Because we don't quite know what is going to replace it. But maybe this is the time, when we are called to re-evaluate some of our beliefs...inherited...or some of the stories we tell ourselves about how things are...or who God is... Maybe it's time to give that up. Even though it may feel like selling everything you have...and allowing something new to come into your life, and take flesh, even. Maybe there are things about ourselves--our self-understandings, that we need to let go of. Maybe some of us feel, "Gosh, if I haven't done that by now--I never will. It's something I've always loved...something I've always wanted to do. But, gee--if I haven't done it--I might as well just give up." What is it that keeps us from moving to our passion...or doing what we've really longed to do? What is it that makes us say "No...that really isn't possible for me. I can't change."

By the way, this morning at the 9:00 hour, one of our guests from this weekend, Sheikh Jamal Rahman...he's a Sufi, a Muslim...told a wonderful little story about a mullah, who everyday...he opened his cheese sandwich. And day after day...a cheese sandwich. And week after week...and he was complaining about his cheese sandwich. And a good friend of his, said "Mullah, I'm sure that if you asked your wife to maybe come up with something, other than a cheese sandwich, if you do it graciously, I'm sure that she will receive that, and that maybe something else can happen for you. And he said, "My wife? I don't have a wife! I make my own cheese sandwich!" What is it that keeps us from changing? What is the one thing that makes us feel that it's not possible? As the text said today: "For mortals, things seem impossible. But for God, nothing is impossible."

Maybe there is something about our relationship with our kids that we have to let go of. Maybe we're trying to live through our kids, or maybe we're trying to protect them. And we're still making decisions for them. There's a time when that's appropriate. But there's a time when your kids are adult, and they have to make their own decisions. And maybe you can even see a train wreck coming, and you want to do everything you can to change it. But you really can't...they have to live their own lives...maybe you have to let go of that. And it feels like letting go of your most valued treasure. Maybe you have to let go of that, because it's actually not good for your kid...it makes them feel that they don't have what it takes to make right decisions...and it's wearing you down, and it's even separating the two of you. What is that one thing, that's wearing you down...that's keeping you from change?

Maybe it's even an attitude that you have about your own health. Maybe you have a disease, and you're wondering if you're ever going to really lick it. And maybe a bit of that conventional wisdom about wealth comes down...like, if I really living my righteous life, I'd be able to beat this thing. Is there something wrong with me, that I have this

concern? Maybe our belief and thinking about certain things that happen to us,-- whether it's a disease, or whatever--it may not be your fault at all. It's part of the human condition. And maybe what you have to let go of, is some beliefs you have about that. And maybe your relationship to your illness, or to your concern, can actually be transformed. And maybe you'll see it in another way. And without being naive about this...maybe actually something powerful about your identity as a human...and about the presence of God, even in your suffering...can become known to you.

What is the one thing that's in our way of making changes? Don't walk away from that question today. In our Gospel story, the man was shocked at Jesus' question, and implications that he had to sell all that he had. And he went away grieving. Walter Brueggemann says that grief is the most visceral announcement that all is not well. If you walk away from this question, all will not be well. Today we have an opportunity to address what are those things, or what is that one thing, that is keeping us from being full participants in our lives...in our world for passion and justice...that help us to feel that we are grateful for every day. Honor your impulse to go beyond where you are. Honor that impulse. Change is difficult. Following Jesus is difficult. And the outcomes may not be what we expect. But I assure you...the outcomes will be better.