

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

October 13, 2024 (Proper 23, Year B)
Mark 10:17-31

One day, the father of a very wealthy family took his son on a trip to the country with the express purpose of showing him how POOR people live. They spent a couple of days and nights on the farm of what would be considered a poor FAMILY.

On their return from their trip, the father asked his son, "How was the trip?"

"It was great, Dad," said his son.

"Did you see how poor people live?" the father asked.

"Oh yes," said the son. "I saw that we have one dog and they had four. We have a pool that reaches to the middle of our garden and they have a creek that has no end. We have imported lanterns in our garden and they have the stars at night. Our patio reaches to the front yard and they have the whole horizon. We have a small piece of land to live on and they have fields that go beyond our sight. We have servants who serve us, but they serve others. We buy our food, but they grow theirs. We have walls around our property to protect us; they have friends to protect them."

The boy's father was speechless. Then his son added, "Thank you, father, for showing me how POOR WE are."

The rich, young man in our Gospel reading was LIKE that father. He MISUNDERSTOOD what TRUE riches ARE.

One of the remarkable things about this story is that this rich man seems so CLOSE to the WAY. When he asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" it's not a TRICK question like the Pharisees always asked; he genuinely wants to KNOW Jesus' answer. He's SO close. He RECOGNIZES that Jesus is the key.

Here's a man that had EVERYTHING going for him. He was WEALTHY, which was believed in THAT culture, AND THIS ONE, to mean that God had BLESSED him. And he's a RIGHTEOUS man too. He says that he's KEPT the commandments since youth and Jesus DOESN'T DISAGREE with him. Jesus LOOKS at him and LOVES him. This is the ONLY place in Matthew, Mark or Luke where we're told that Jesus LOVES a PARTICULAR person. Jesus SINCERELY WANTS this man to follow him.

But something STOPS the man—his possessions. He hears Jesus' commands—Go! Sell! Give! And he's stunned. Can his possessions really be standing BETWEEN him and eternal life? And he walks AWAY! He BELIEVES Jesus, but he can't accept it. He walks away GRIEVING, because he JUST CAN'T DO it. He CAN'T give up his possessions. It's a sad story really. He's so CLOSE to the way.

But is Jesus being fair? Let's be honest – we LIKE our stuff, we like BUYING it and we like HAVING it – old stuff, new stuff, big stuff, little stuff, MANLY stuff, feminine stuff, collectible stuff, sentimental stuff, I might USE it SOMEDAY stuff, I might FIX it someday stuff. We LIKE our STUFF.

Sure, maybe we could GIVE more and BUY less. Maybe we could give more to the church, and maybe we could do WITHOUT some of the EXTRA stuff. But must we go out and sell everything we own and give the money to the poor?

Well, maybe. God does seem to have a particular passion for the poor. But there isn't NECESSARILY anything wrong with our stuff ITSELF. The problem is when the stuff starts to own US.

I want to tell you a story. When I was in high school I received an award for a poem I wrote that got published. It was a small TROPHY, and I received it at an award banquet down in the Twin Cities. Now, for a small town kid like me, that was the proudest day of my life. And the trophy, well it was the most meaningful, and the most ... RIDICULOUSLY UGLY thing that I have EVER owned. It was this

little block of wood, with a gold typewriter on one side and a gold pen-holder and pen on the other. MAN, was it ugly. But it was MY trophy and I KEPT it, and I displayed it. And I took it WITH me when I went off to college, and when I moved home for the summer, and when I went back for my Sophomore year, and again for my Junior year. Every time I moved, I took that STUPID little thing with me – when I moved into my first apartment, and my second apartment, and my third apartment, and when I moved to seminary, and to internship and back to seminary. 11 times, 11 TIMES I packed and unpacked that hideous thing, and EVERY time I thought about getting rid of it. Wendy even offered to do it FOR me, SEVERAL times, but I just COULDN'T throw it away. Finally, when we moved out to North Dakota, I DID get rid of it, mostly because Wendy REFUSED to LET me pack it again, but it was HARD for me. That THING had a kind POWER over me.

When we think about OBSTACLES to eternal life, we might picture terrible SINS, slavery to addictions, or conniving to gain success. But Jesus says the GREATEST OBSTACLE can be the VERY thing we consider the greatest BLESSING – wealth. Depending on POSSESSIONS for MEANING in our lives can BLOCK us off from God much more RUTHLESSLY than the UGLIEST of sins.

But, again, it's not the possessions THEMSELVES. People often quote St. Paul as saying "Money is the root of all evil," but those aren't quite Paul's words. What he ACTUALLY said in 1 Timothy was "The LOVE of money is the root of all evil" (6:10). There isn't NECESSARILY anything wrong with our STUFF ITSELF. The problem is when the stuff starts to OWN US.

Our possessions are just objects, but they have a way of becoming MORE than that. They have a way of going from what we OWN to who we ARE. That's the DANGER our Gospel story is pointing to – sometimes our POSSESSIONS POSSESS US. We can begin to DEFINE ourselves by WHAT and how MUCH we HAVE.

And it seems that's ESPECIALLY true of our money. This is the only time ANYWHERE in the Gospels, the ONLY time, that Jesus CALLS somebody to follow him, and they turn AWAY. Think about that. When Jesus called ALL of his disciples, the response was immediate and unquestioned. They dropped EVERYTHING and FOLLOWED him. There was something ABOUT Jesus, about his CALL that MADE disciples. But NOT THIS man. What stopped him?

WEALTH seems to be the ONLY thing that has that kind of POWER over us. Maybe that's why the Bible mentions giving of your resources more than 1500 times, and Jesus talked about money more than ANY other subject. Possessions are a PROBLEM. They have a way, WITHOUT our even being AWARE of it, of becoming the MOST important thing in our lives, becoming WHO we ARE. We let them sidetrack us from what's REALLY important – from God.

That's what HAPPENED to the rich, young man. He COULDN'T give up his stuff. He couldn't separate HIMSELF from his MONEY. It was TOO much a part of him, of WHO he WAS.

And Jesus CHALLENGED that. Jesus called the rich, young man, and US, to a radical NEW identity: He called us to be children of God, living for GOD ALONE, LOVING God THROUGH our neighbors, SERVING and GIVING to those in need.

As Henry David Thoreau said, "Be not MERELY good; be good FOR SOMETHING." Don't just be good at making money or keeping commandments; be good FOR something. Be good for your family. Be good for your church. Be good for your community. Be good for God, good for service, good for OTHERS.

Like the disciples, WE TOO ask, "If someone like HIM, who's got EVERYTHING going for him, money AND respectability AND faithfulness, if HE can't get in, 'Then WHO CAN be saved?'"

And Jesus answers, "Well, no one. 'For mortals it is impossible.'" It's impossible for the rich, it's impossible for the righteous, and it's impossible for the REST of us too. It's as RIDICULOUS as a camel going through the eye of a needle.

It's as ridiculous as, say, GOD DYING on a cross. But "for GOD ALL things are possible."

It's so ironic that when this rich, young man stops Jesus to ask what HE could do to ACHIEVE eternal life, Jesus is on the way to Golgotha, to do what ONLY HE could do, to GIVE us eternal life. For Jesus, his ENTIRE ministry, his whole life, death, and resurrection, they're ALL really about this

ONE IMPOSSIBLE thing – breaking that eye of the needle wide open, so that camels and elephants and blue whales like us can pass THROUGH it, into his kingdom. “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God ALL things are possible.”

As it turns out, the rich, young man WASN'T REALLY rich at all; the RICHEST person ISN'T the one who HAS the MOST, but the one who NEEDS the LEAST.

“You lack just ONE thing.” His name is Jesus.

Thank you, Father, for showing us how POOR WE REALLY ARE. Amen.