

19th Sunday After Pentecost – October 15, 2006
St. John's Episcopal Church, Charleston, WV
Mark 10:17-31 – The Rich Man¹

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From the Gospel: *“Sell what you own, and give the money to the poor.”*

Today's Gospel is one of those readings we can't just slough off -- we're forced to come to grips with it. One way to determine what scripture means is to read and re-read the story, thinking about it each time as a different one of the characters. In doing this, you see the point of view of the different participants. It's a really good way to pull out the meaning of a story. So let's do that this morning.

To make it more personal for today, let's just call the rich man “Max.” Giving him a name will make it easier to talk about him.

We start our living in the story with the disciples. Pick one, any one, and become that person in your mind. Do you have it? You're one of the many people who have chosen to follow Jesus of Nazareth around the countryside. In the section right before today's story, the disciples have been doing their usual thing, in this case trying to keep the little children who want to see Jesus from doing so.

We do this a lot – deciding what is best for Jesus and “taking over.” Even though he tells us over and over again not to, we keep on trying to run his life. The fact is, we disciples are a little slow to “get” what's going on.

So Jesus and a whole crowd of people are walking down the road, and suddenly Max comes up to Jesus and starts talking to him. When I put myself in the person of

¹ This sermon was markedly improved by the assistance of the Rev. Elizabeth Hoster, to whom appreciation is extended.

one of the disciples, I see Max, and first thing, I think about is intercepting him and sending him away. Jesus has more important things to do than stop and talk to everybody who wants to talk to him. We have places to go and a schedule to keep.

Then I remember “suffer the little children to come unto me,” and I stop. There is no way I’m going to get between Jesus and this guy. I’m going to let Jesus handle this one all by himself!

And so Jesus and Max begin to talk, and I watch.

And I realize that the boss really likes this guy – Mark says “Jesus looked at him and loved him.” That’s a really strong statement. And Jesus is right. I have no sense that Max is anything but completely sincere. He has kept the commandments – and let me tell you, keeping the Jewish law is a full-time job. Max has done everything the Law commands him to do, and there’s still something missing, and he knows it. And he thinks Jesus can tell him what he has to do to get into heaven.

Jesus says to Max, “You’re rich. All you have to do is leave here, go back to your house and sell everything, give the money to the poor, and then catch up with us.”

Terrific, I say, one more mouth to feed. You know it’s just like Jesus – he never has a thought for tomorrow. He should have told Max to bring his money along to pay for all this traveling around the country. You try feeding a crowd of five thousand without money to pay for it.

Reading it this way, do you understand why Jesus gets so frustrated by those of us who are his disciples? Do you marvel that he continues to love us?

Now, change roles and put yourself in the part of Max (and make no mistake about it – we are Max in this story).

OK, I'm Max. (I should have brought different hats to wear!) I really have been blessed in my life. I have followed the Law of Moses, lived a good and pure life, and I'm wealthy on top of it.

I'm still not satisfied. Everybody thinks I should be. I have a good business, a loving wife, nice children, but something is wrong. It just feels incomplete. I hear about this rabbi traveling around healing people and getting everybody all excited, so I go out to find him.

I kneel down in the road, which is not the way I usually start a conversation. But even so, somehow, I get off on the wrong foot. "Good teacher," I say, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus is quick to say "don't call me good – only God is good."

And then Jesus pushes me off even further. He tells me to obey the ten commandments. And it's only when I tell him I've been doing that, that he stops and focuses on me. He takes a really good look at me, and it's a feeling I've never had before, and I know I have come to the right man to find the answer to my problem.

Think about it. We (as Max) have just come face-to-face with God, with the Messiah, with the savior of the world, and God is looking at us and loving us. That has to be a staggering moment.

And then Jesus tells me.

All I have to do to obtain eternal life is to sell everything I own, give it to the poor, and come back to be one of his followers. I hear him tell me that, and I am shocked. Is this son of a carpenter out of his mind? I'm an important man. I have a business, a family, I have responsibilities. I can't just toss it all out the window and follow him.

And so I get up, shake the dust off of my clothes, and walk away – really depressed. I mean, I thought I was pretty close – doing all the right things. But I wasn't ready to hear this.

Now switch back to being a disciple. Peter, good old Peter who is usually the last one to figure it out, starts to argue with Jesus. "Look," he says, "look at us – we did exactly what you told Max to do. We left everything and followed you." And Jesus says, "It's OK, Peter, I know you did. The world is going to be turned upside down. People like that fellow who just left are first now, but they will be last. And you, just a poor fisherman when I called you, you're going to be first."

That's a summary – with imagination – of today's Gospel. So where are we, you and I? What's really the point of this story?

Well, Jesus is not telling all of us we have to give up all our worldly goods – that is simply not his message.

Think back to what Max asked him.

The question was not "what's the way to heaven?" You know the answer to that: "I am the way and the truth and the life." No, Max's question was framed in terms of following the Law; he was looking for a formula, some rules he could obey. "What do I have to do to insure that I have worked my way into heaven?" And Jesus says, "It's just not possible for you to do something to get yourself into heaven.

What have the disciples done that is so hard for so many of us? That Max couldn't do? The true followers of Jesus have chosen to put their trust in God. They have given up everything, true, but what that really means is at the heart of everything the Bible teaches us. Over and over again, the clear statement of the Bible, old and new testament alike, is Trust in God. That's what Jesus is telling Max, and it's what he's telling us. Stop relying on your possessions and your position and put your trust in God.

When Jesus sends his disciples out to teach, he tells them to take nothing extra, take just enough for today, trust in God, and God will provide.

In the Lord's Prayer, which we will pray shortly, we pray for our daily bread, not for a week's supply or a month's supply. We ask God for what we need for today, and we trust in God to provide for today, and tomorrow. That is not easy to do – it wasn't easy for Max and it's not easy for us, especially not in an uncertain world where things consume our lives.

When God gives us more than we need, and he has done that for me, and he has done that for you, what do we do with the extra? You already know the answer to that.

The place where we need treasure is in heaven. We need to help those who need help, to share the gifts God has so generously given us, trusting in God to continue to provide for tomorrow.

As Max so aptly illustrates, that's tough.

Now I must tell you that when I started praying about this sermon, I didn't realize it was going to be followed by a stewardship luncheon. But given that it is, I want to tell you a true story.

When I was a much younger man, I went one Sunday morning with the father of a friend of mine to a very wealthy Episcopal church, in the Georgetown section of Washington, DC. And it was stewardship Sunday. The rector rose to deliver his sermon, and you could hear a kind of groan from the pews.

The rector said, "I know you don't like stewardship Sunday sermons." And heads nodded. Yeah, got that right. "And so," he continued, "I'll make this simple for you." And he then delivered the best stewardship sermon I have ever heard.

He said, “Just for today, we need to talk about money. You’ve got it. We need it. Give it to us.” And he sat down.

That message is right in line with what Jesus told Max. You’ve got it. God gave it to you. It needs to be used to help others. Not all of it, just some of it, but for your own sake and to gain eternal life, you need to give away that security blanket and trust in God.

We could stop right here, but then we wouldn’t have the chance to do the fun part of this kind of Bible study. Let’s go back into the Gospel, really using our imaginations this time, because we’re going to deal with something the Bible doesn’t tell us about, using what we know from other stories.

What do you think happens to Max? Does he inherit eternal life?

I think Max goes home, and stays depressed for a long time. He’s probably hard to live with. He goes over and over in his mind the experience he had with Jesus, remembering that feeling of completion he had when Jesus focused on him, when Jesus loved him.

What Jesus said to him keeps going around and around in his mind.

And then one day he hears the news. Jesus has been captured and taken before a Roman judge. The next thing he hears is that Jesus has been crucified. And Max knows that’s wrong. He knows with all his heart that the man who spoke to him, who turned his life upside down, didn’t deserve to die.

And then he hears something that changes his life all over again. He hears that Jesus Christ, Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the Son of God, Jesus who spoke directly to his heart, is alive. And this time, Max understands the message.

To his friends and his family, to his business associates, he becomes a changed man. He lets go of the control he had of his life, and gives that over to God.

In my version of Paul Harvey's "the rest of the story," Max lives a long and happy life. He shares the riches God gave him with one and all. And in due course, Max dies. His loss is deeply felt in his town, for he has become much more than the man he once was.

And Max does arrive in heaven.

And Jesus greets Max and says, "Well done. You got it.

"You had it. Others needed it. You gave it to them." And Max says, and we must say, "Thanks be to God!"