

Mark 10:17-31 (NLT adapted)

The Rich Man

¹⁷ As Jesus was starting out on his way to Jerusalem, a man came running up to him, knelt down, and asked, “Good Teacher, what must I pay to acquire eternal life?”

¹⁸ “Why do you call me good?” Jesus asked. “Only God is truly good. ¹⁹ But to answer your question, you know the commandments: ‘You must not murder. You must not commit adultery. You must not steal. You must not testify falsely. You must not cheat anyone. Honor your father and mother.’ ”

²⁰ “Teacher,” the man replied, “I’ve obeyed all these commandments since I was young.”

²¹ Looking at the man, Jesus felt genuine love for him. “There is still one thing you haven’t done,” he told him. “Go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

²² At this the man was appalled, and he went away offended, for he had many possessions.

²³ Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God!” ²⁴ This amazed them. But Jesus said again, “Dear children, it is very hard to enter the Kingdom of God. ²⁵ In fact, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!”

²⁶ The disciples were astounded. “Then who in the world can be saved?” they asked.

²⁷ Jesus looked at them intently and said, “Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But not with God. Everything is possible with God.”

²⁸ Then Peter began to speak up. “We’ve given up everything to follow you,” he said.

²⁹ “Yes,” Jesus replied, “and I assure you that everyone who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or property, for my sake and for the Good News, ³⁰ will receive now in return a hundred times as many houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and property—along with persecution. And in the world to come that person will have eternal life.

³¹ But many who are the greatest now will be least important then, and those who seem least important now will be the greatest then.”

Good News?

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

Date: August 15, 2006

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Text: *Mark 10:17-31*

Some of you may recall a children's sermon from an Advent long ago. As usual, we had an Advent lighting ceremony each Sunday in worship. In that particular year we let each candle represent some of the actors in the great Christmas story. There was, of course, the Christ candle. But for the four weeks before we got to that white Christ Candle, we lit the prophets' candle, the shepherd's candle, the angels' candle and the wise men's candle. We decided to use the children's sermon each week to explain the meaning.

One thing ministers learn pretty quickly is that in a children's sermon either you don't ever ask a question you want a particular answer to, or you had better be prepared to be very nimble on your feet. Because very often the answer you get from the children will vary wildly from the one you had in mind.

On this particular Advent Sunday our student minister gave the children's sermon. He had been at the church three short months. He was still learning his craft, it's fair to say. But even so, I thought he began reasonably well. "Today we are going to light the Prophet's Candle. Can anyone tell me what a prophet is?" It was a question, alright, but I thought the right answer would be obvious, at least to some of the older children, who had been educated in our Sunday School program. When one of the junior-high schoolers raised his hand confidently, all seemed well. "Yes, go ahead, Ben. Tell us what a prophet is." Ben proudly blurted out the correct answer. "A profit is what you get to keep when you buy something for one price and then sell it for a higher price."

The old church shook with giggles. Poor young Ben didn't couldn't imagine what he said that made everyone snicker at him, and he was obviously embarrassed. The student minister, embarrassed also, vowed never ask a child a question again as long as he lived. All in all it was a curiously appropriate start to Advent, that season in which, against a darkness that seems impossible to penetrate, we must wait patiently for God's light. We had found the darkness, or at least the fog of confusion.

We preachers are a strange lot. We learn lessons about how to manage children's sermons and many other things. Most of the lessons we learn the hard way, so we look back on a lifetime of mini-disasters that, if we have been fortunate enough to survive them, have formed us and made us wiser. But also, and this is what makes us so strange, we find in many of these same misadventures, quite aside from the lessons they have taught us, grist for our sermons. You can hear preachers looking at ordinary events of life, eyes mysteriously aglow, mumbling, "That'll preach! That'll preach!" For example, the Advent children's sermon about the prophet helped us learn to be better at giving children's sermons. But this morning it got me thinking about something quite different, something that'll preach. It got me thinking about how much making a profit, the money kind; how much a thirst to own and possess things pervades our lives, and how much it's what Jesus talks to us about time and again.

In this morning's passage we find a rich young man who comes to Jesus. He comes to Jesus with excitement, with admiration, with hopefulness. He comes running to Jesus, kneels down before him, and listen to what he says. He says, "Good Teacher, what must I pay to acquire eternal life?" Many translations fail to capture the full-force of what the young man said. The New Revised Standard Version says, "What must I do to inherit eternal life." But the force of the Greek is much stronger. "What must I pay or accomplish to acquire or possess eternal life." These two important words, pay and acquire, are going to figure heavily in what Jesus has to say to us in the rest of the passage.

Jesus says to the young man, "You know the law. What is required?" The man couldn't be happier at Jesus' question. For here the man is blameless. "Teacher, I've obeyed all these commandments since I was young." You can almost detect the man's delight. The teacher who is attracting crowds out in the wilderness, the one to whom many are flocking because he speaks with true authority about God, this teacher seems to tell the young man that he's all set. He's done what he needs to do. He doesn't need to do anything more.

Of course, we know the story. Jesus doesn't stop there. He doesn't let the young man off the hook so easily, as good and moral as the man has been. Jesus says, "Go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

The man had been figuring the profit margin. So far he had been keeping the commandments, living a good and moral life. He calculates the cost against the benefits. If I pay this much – following the commandments – then maybe I will get this much – eternal life, the kingdom of God. Seems like a good deal, a good profit. Plus, I get to keep all the stuff I own. Excellent. But Jesus offers him a different calculation. Pay everything you possess and follow me, then you will possess eternal life. The prophet margins here look very different. The young man has many possessions. Jesus seems to say that eternal life is going to be more costly than the man had thought. Not only does he have to follow the commandments, but he also has to give everything he has away and follow Jesus.

Here again, most translations soften the force of the Greek. The NRSV says that the man was shocked and went away grieving. Other translations say the man was disheartened and went away sorrowful. But a much better reading is that the young man was appalled and he went away offended. That sounds more like it, don't you think? Here he is, a good Christian man, good values, goes to church most Sundays with his family, contributes generously in the offering plate, doesn't cheat or defraud anyone, a respected member of the community. "I can tell you one thing," he whispers to his wife as he goes down the front steps of the church, "That church has seen about its last contribution from me. Who does the minister think he is, insulting decent people like us? I can tell you one thing. Without people like us there wouldn't be a church. Let's see how he likes it when we take our pledge down the street." The man was appalled and offended, and he walked away from Jesus. The cost was too high and the profit too low.

From off to the side the disciples have been watching this scene unfold. They are pretty shocked, too. They say to Jesus, "Boy, if that guy can't be saved, who in the world can be?" Jesus says that can only happen by God, not human effort. Peter says, "Well, we have given up everything to follow you. How about us?" Jesus' answer is cagey. He grants that giving up everything and following him are part of the story, but he adds two dimensions we have not yet seen. He says that those who give up all for his sake, but then he adds for, for the Gospel's sake,

will be rewarded. Jesus lists the rewards, but toward the end of list is one they probably didn't expect. If they give up all they have and follow him and the Gospel, they can expect to be persecuted.

Once again, Jesus ups the cost, and here he seems to lower the benefit, too. Not only do they give up everything and follow him, but they also have to follow the Gospel, the good news, the message of Jesus.

This is the crux of the story, if you will. For Jesus following the Gospel means quite simply giving up the cost benefit analysis, giving up the profit and loss calculations, and most important giving up the idea that the kingdom of God, or whatever else one gets from following the Gospel, is something that you pay for and then possess. Today's story is just before the story we will look at next week, where James and John want to know if they can sit at Jesus' right and left in glory. Clearly the disciples, like the rich young man, are still calculating the profit margin. They've given up everything and followed Jesus, and they want to know if that's enough to get box seats on the first-base line. If so, they figure it was a good investment.

What Jesus keeps trying to drive home, however, that it is the very idea of making the profit, the very idea of sacrificing one thing in the hopes of getting a better thing, that that is the heart of the problem. What was a problem in Jesus' day has become a plague in ours.

When someone asks you what your net worth is, what are they asking? They're asking, what are your financial assets. Your net worth, your value, is simply calculated by subtracting what you owe from what you possess and coming up with a number. That number is your net worth. Are you satisfied with that as definition of what you are worth?

And yet most of us have accepted the definition at some level, and it has come at great cost. Many of us work too hard, spend too many hours in the office, chasing a career, away from family and friends and simple pleasures. We do it, in part at least, because we think it's worth it, that the cost benefit is favorable. A larger house, professional recognition, if I just had an iPod, designer jeans, a big SUV. The creatures that God created to oversee creation have become a menace to it. The ice-flows melt. And on the other hand our hearts chill. And the spiral of possessing fails to make us happy. And yet, like the young man in the story, we have a hard time bringing ourselves to let it go. We're not sure it will pay.

And, in fact, Jesus tells us that it doesn't really work that way. The idea isn't to give up the big house and the SUV so that you can get more here, or in glory. It's not a matter of having the wrong possessions, or of making a profit by changing material possessions for spiritual ones. It is a matter of coming to realize that we are not made whole or happy or complete by possessing anything, be it wealth like the man in today's story has, or some spiritual accomplishment we seek in its stead.

The move the Gospel makes is to show us that it is losing our attachment to possessions of any kind that frees us to experience eternal life. And so, to experience eternal life, we cannot desire to possess it.

There is irony in this. I once knew a young man who had lost his spouse and was very lonely. After he had grieved awhile, he began to imagine a new relationship. Well, imagine isn't exactly right. He began to obsess about a new relationship. He needed a new relationship. He would then surely feel whole again. Then one day, when he was sitting quietly in prayer, a voice came to him. It whispered to him, "You will have a rewarding new relationship as soon as you don't need it." The young man thought, "What kind of message is that? 'You will have a

rewarding new relationship as soon as you don't need it?" "Wherever that thought came from, it's certainly not good news!" the man thought. But it was true. His obsessive need made what he wanted impossible to have. For a rewarding relationship cannot be possessed. So, too, it is with a relationship with God. We cannot possess it, or buy it. Indeed, our needs to possess it will keep it always out of reach.

When Jesus told the young man to give everything he had to the poor and follow him, the young man couldn't bring himself to do it, and he walked away offended. I hope that this morning we have come to see that Jesus wasn't asking so much for a transaction from the man – your possessions for eternal life. But even so, we who are most of us caught in our own traps of possessing things may feel equally incapacitated in the face of letting go of everything and following Jesus. I know I do. In large part it's because we are all caught in the cost-benefit bind. We have a hard time convincing ourselves that it will be worth it.

I suppose few of us can get over that hump all at once. But I do have a suggestion. What we are trying to get over is the idea that we are supposed to get something for the things, the possessions we give up. But if we can begin small, then maybe we can give away something without any thought of what we'll get for it, or what it will accomplish. Maybe it's a donation to the church or to a charity, just to give it. Or you plan to smile at someone you pass by, and you tell yourself you are not going to need or expect a smile in return. You get the idea. Give away something, a possession, a part of yourself, without any profit motive whatsoever. Without even the motive of feeling good about yourself. I'd love to hear next week how it went if you have tried it. And in the meantime, may the Gospel, the good news, that we never can possess, may that Gospel possess you, for that it can do. Amen.