

Pentecost XIX (Proper 23B) RCL  
October 11, 2009

St. Margaret's  
Annapolis

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.  
*Amen.*

It's inevitable that this is the time of year for the annual pledge drive... for National Public Radio! Thankfully, most NPR stations have shortened the fall pledge drive from what used to be a week-to-ten-days to only one or two days. However long or short it is, it's annoying. But I'm such a diehard NPR fan that I usually listen anyway.

It's worth waiting for the news, and actually, some of the appeals themselves are worth the wait. One of my favorites was the one with this smooth, elegant voice saying something like this:

"Since I wrote my check to NPR, my three children have come to their senses. Two are now honor students, and the third plans to go into medicine. When I wrote my second check to NPR, my business thrived, investments flourished [this *was* a while back!] and my garden bloomed. Now that I've written my third check, my hair is shinier. Coincidence? I don't think so."

Well, it gave me a chuckle at the time.

So... it's that time of year here, too, and in most churches. And although stewardship is year 'round and about more than money, it is that time of year when we begin to plan next year's budget and ask parishioners to begin to think and pray about their pledge for next year.

Just to give you a heads-up, here at St. Margaret's, you'll be receiving our annual stewardship material in the next couple of weeks, and our Pledge Sunday will be November 8<sup>th</sup>. Meanwhile, the lessons for the next several Sundays will give us ample opportunity to consider stewardship.

In fact, I've often wondered if the people who developed the lectionary – those readings that we're assigned for each Sunday – had the annual pledge drive in mind when they choose the readings for this time of year.

Take today, for instance. In one of the most poignant stories of the gospels, a wealthy young man runs up to Jesus – who is a poor, itinerate rabbi – and kneels before him and asks, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” What a scene that must have been!

Here is this first century young urban professional from Jerusalem... hard working, successful, responsible. Probably well known in the community; maybe coaches down at the YMJA in his spare time; delivers food baskets on Passover Eve. Respected. Well thought-of. Brilliant future. For all intents and purposes, he’s got it all.

But something is missing in his life. There is some... longing that he can’t quite name. “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

At first, Jesus gives him something of a standard answer. He simply recites the basic commandments: don’t mess around, don’t steal, don’t lie, don’t cheat, take good care of your folks (they took good care of you). Nothing radical here.

But the young man says, Yes, yes, I do all that. I’ve obeyed those commandments since I was knee high to a grasshopper. And in his earnestness, Jesus heard his longing. Heard his yearning for something more.

And the text says, ever so simply, “...looking at him, [Jesus] loved him...”

He loved him. And he said to him, Here’s what you need to do to find what you are looking for: “...go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and... follow me.” This is the treasure you are searching for. When the young man heard this, the story tells us, “he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”

Shocked is right. Appalled is more like it. He may have been feeling some vague desire for... for what, he didn’t know... but sell it all?!? How could that help? Then he would *be* one of the poor! Even his religion told him that his prosperity was a sign of God’s favor. Sell it all? Give it away? That can’t be right!

A major donation to the synagogue building fund maybe. Even increase his giving to the community outreach ministry. But sell it all? Give it away? Follow this guy around the countryside? Not likely. No.

Instead, he turned and walked away... full of sadness, yes. But he walked away.

That tells us something about this young man, doesn't it. He must have known... he must have known that he was walking away from the most important turning point in his life. I wonder if he grieved that moment for the rest of his life.

There's no way around it. This story is about money. Money and everything that goes along with it: identity, power, prestige, possessions, the illusion of security. We can allegorize from now until the Second Coming – about it being whatever it is that we can't let go of and such – but in the end, it really is about money. And never more so than now – in our current culture and the collective anxiety about the economy.

Jacob Needleman is a professor of philosophy at San Francisco State University and the author of a book entitled Money and the Meaning of Life. He writes, "We live...in...an 'affluent society.' This means not only that we have much material wealth, but that *we want this wealth more than everything else.*"

But, he observes, it doesn't do for us what we want. It doesn't make us happy. It doesn't keep us from getting sick or having tragedies in our lives. It doesn't keep our children safe or free us from worry. In fact, the professor says, it confines us to a kind of self-imposed hell.

In a chapter called "The New Poverty," he says, "Hell is the state in which we are barred from receiving what we truly need because of the value we give to what we merely want."

The rich young man went to Jesus to find something that was missing from his life. He had kept the Law. He had done what his religion demanded of him. But it wasn't... enough. And this rabbi, this strangely attractive teacher, who seemed to have what he was looking for, confirmed what he already knew, however unconsciously – that it wasn't enough to just obey the law and keep the rules. What was required, what IS required, is a kind of radical love of God that makes money and possessions *inconsequential*.

But... what about our responsibilities, we cry! What about our obligations? Our families? What about our civic duty? And we go away grieving.

Well, I don't know about you, but I, too, am longing for that *something* like the rich young man in the story. Like him, I'm pretty good about keeping the rules. I say my prayers and try to love my neighbors. In most every way, I am blessed. But there is part of me that knows that I am too tied to worldly things. That, like him, I would grieve terribly if confronted personally by Jesus telling me to let it all go. And having recently moved, I am altogether too aware of exactly how much I've accumulated; of what a hold it has on me.

Preacher and author Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way: "You cannot accept God's gift if you have no spare hands to take it with. You cannot make room for it if your rooms are already full. You cannot follow if you are not free to go."

Let it go and give it away, Jesus says. It's easier to get a truck through a keyhole than to get into heaven with all that baggage!

Well, in truth, Jesus does not tell everyone to sell what they own and give it away. He may or may not be saying that to you. Only you know that. But what I do know is that Jesus tells us all that to find what we seek, to fill the unnamed longing in our hearts, to satisfy the yearning that won't go away, we must put God first in our hearts, in our minds, in our souls. In our very living and being.

And as long as money continues to be the central symbol of our culture, of our lives, we – like the rich young man – will have to choose which it will be: focus our time and energy on protecting our wealth... or let it go and trust God.

I ask myself: what will it take for me to really put God first? What will it take for you?

Amen.

lml+