

October 11, 2009

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 10:17-31

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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The idea of eternal life is often associated with some disembodied life after we die. We die, the soul goes to heaven and everything is better. While there is no way for anyone to make a claim as to knowing the truth about this disembodied state, we can at least look at what Mark is writing about here, because it might not be about the same thing. The Jewish people at the time often thought of the world as one with two ages. The present age is the current time, which is caught up in sin, injustice and oppression. Then there is the age to come, the time when God finally passes judgment on evil, sin, injustice and oppression of the world are obliterated. The world will be as intended in Creation.

The rich man who has everything comes to Jesus and asks how to inherit eternal life? When we hear "how do I inherit eternal life", we are hearing "how do I inherit the age to come, the time when God reigns on earth." It is not about some disembodied state, or how to follow a list of commands in order to get into some heaven somewhere else.

Jesus responds, "sell everything, give your money to the poor and follow me." Well, the man asked a big question and he got a big answer. Lets face it, Jesus put out a pretty big matzo ball right there.

Then comes the reaction from the rich man, surely the same as many who hear it today. It is a feeling of grieving and sadness, and most who hear it move away from this message, crestfallen, perhaps wondering how this is possible in the present age, our time, or how could Jesus make such a demand and even expect anyone to follow it. Many then must make a choice to give up on getting into heaven, the mainstream idea of eternal life, or ignore the instructions of Jesus, but assume that we are excused from this particular instruction in some way. Quite frankly, it is hard to blame anyone for thinking this way. Jesus' response seems like a draconian command really.

We live in a market economy and the pressure is on. We all know it. Consider the modern parents. We are making payments on a couple of cars, a house, maybe a boat or a lake house. We are paying off the credit cards, which helped them buy a few TVs, two or three computers, cell phones. We have kids, so there is school tuition to pay or to save for and this all costs a whopping amount of money, so it means less time at home and more hours at work, which means we have to raise more money for child care. Our harried life means less home cooked meals, so we have to eat out several times a week. Well, if we eat out that much we gotta work off the flab, so we need a membership at the gym, maybe put a couple bicycles extra on the credit card. Let's not forget that the lifestyle has to

be protected, so we need to purchase health insurance, car insurance, house insurance, and life insurance. Let's not forget the Church, which needs money to function. So, when Sunday rolls around we generously put a \$20 bill into the plate. It is just another financial responsibility to meet. This whole racket is stressful. Life gets less enjoyable, we hold on to the little we have, become less generous, less loving. But, it still gives identity, prestige, distinction. Not to mention, playing the game keeps us off the street. How can Jesus suggest we give it all up? How can we trust someone like that?

Perhaps, trust is the point. The rich man may have been much like us, trapped in some system that brought him prestige but not happiness, nor a spiritual connection to the Creator. This idea would have gone against the grain, because wealth was seen as a sign of God's blessing. But, perhaps the man felt empty somehow and wanted more. So he asks the question, how can I find life in the age to come? Jesus says sell it all. Do not put your trust in the system, put your trust in me. Sell. Accumulation of wealth does not bring happiness, generosity does. Sell. If you want to live in the age to come, start living it now. The age to come is now. I am with you.

I have a friend who is something like the rich man. He was in hotel brokerage business, real estate, and he did quite well. Married, two children. His life would have been quite similar to the one I portrayed earlier. Upwardly mobile, but constricting. So my friend began to yearn for more. There has to be more he thought. He sensed a call to ministry, but he avoided his call for a while, volunteering instead, doing Stephen ministry, taking adult ed classes at church. But he was still deeply entrenched into his lifestyle, only making small incremental changes in his life. However, the Spirit was at work, not letting him go so easily. My friend was hearing something similar to "Sell. Put your trust in me."

After discerning for sometime he decided on a new vocation that allowed him more time for ministry and changed his lifestyle. Getting to the financial top was not his goal. He really did sell. He and his wife took the command more literally than others, and got rid of a boatload of stuff. I think he went too far, because he got rid of his golf clubs. I am not sure why. Maybe he thought golf was not included in the age to come. I disagree. But, he and his wife put their trust in something new, something centered on Christ and they are happy. They are more at ease. There is a sense of peace that they are finally on the right track, focused on the right thing. Their lives now are brimming with new possibilities. Life is still hard and they still have financial burdens; but they live more generously and do not live in want. God provides.

We all can't drop what we are doing and make wholesale changes in one day. But perhaps this command to sell is not a command, but an invitation. It is an invitation to take stock, to examine into where we put our hearts, our minds, our trust; an invitation to explore how we can live more freely, more generously; an invitation to participate in a different system, one where our self worth does

not rely on the prestige of how far we can go up the corporate ladder, but relies on the love of Christ experienced in community. Perhaps it is an invitation to live in less anxiety, to feel less a prisoner of the economic forces around us, and more an enabler of hope.

This alternative system built on love, this trust is part of what we say in our baptismal promises. We say we are going to put our whole trust in the love and grace of Christ. We promise to obey and follow Christ. As Christians, we do this so we can continue to move the world towards a new era, so we can advance closer to that life of the age to come. Of course, we cannot have this new life, without the help of God in Christ. However, with God all things are possible. We can even begin to experience the life of the age to come. Jesus is with us, inviting us to a new way.