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Mark 10:17-31
Amos 5:6-7, 10-15
Psalm 90:12-17
Hebrew 4:12-16

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The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

How many of you have ever given away all of your belongings? I mean everything...down to your clothes, your car, your house, your retirement savings? Well, what if Jesus told you to give all of that away and walk off with just the clothes on your back? Would you do it?

Let's just put this on the table so we can clear our conscience...most of us probably would not. In fact, I don't know anyone who has ever given up everything that they owned. And, (let's take a big breath here) I don't think that is what Jesus is asking of us when he says to the rich man in our Gospel reading, "go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor and follow me." Yet, this text from Mark is often over-sensationalized into a perfect picture of a proper, faithful servant of God.

To be sure, you might have heard sermons preached on this text as a guilt trip into increasing stewardship pledges or against spending money on things deemed too worldly. As a way for others to judge your piousness based upon your assets and your philanthropic output.

This morning, I want you to put all of those notions aside. Because when I hear this text interpreted in these ways I am reminded that is far too easy to engage in an outward critique of one another and not an inward critique of our own hearts.

In fact, I want us to consider that this text has nothing to do with outer gains or losses when it comes to wealth or possessions. Jesus isn't condemning what we have earned, what we possess, or what we enjoy. What Jesus condemns in Mark is the value we place on such things at the expense of the greater needs around us.

Look at how the narrative unfolds. The rich man comes to Jesus because he has recognized something within himself that desires to be closer to God. He has followed the rules. He has honored tradition and respected the rituals of his community. By all outward appearances, he was the image of a proper, faithful servant of God. He looked the part.

But he knows something that no one else knows...something is missing within him....and so he starts looking at a way to ground himself much deeper in relationship to God.

That's the first lesson from our text...in order to be closer to God, we have to first recognize that we need God. Jesus, the rich man asks, how can I inherent eternal life? What else do I need to do?

Now, there are some who might interpret his request as selfish...as just one more thing he wanted to obtain, one more bragging right to his already long list of accomplishments. But, I want to take his question at face value...as one with pure intent...God...I know I have tried really hard but I still feel in my heart that I need more of you....so how do I do that?

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The second thing we learn is that Jesus shows this man love. He doesn't second guess his motivations...Jesus just meets him where he is at. Maybe Jesus is moved by this man's eagerness. Maybe he sees special potential in the kind of follower this man could become. Whatever the explanation may be what we do know is that Jesus takes his love for this rich man and turns it into a path toward awareness and service and conviction...a way to become closer to God. Jesus offers him the opportunity to change...to gain a path toward righteousness that the man so desires.

That's the second lesson...Jesus' love for us is full of faithful expectation and the opportunity to do good. Jesus believes in us. He doesn't judge our motivations. He just sees our potential.

Finally, we learn that in offering his love, Jesus is also willing to allow that love to be let go. This is a really interesting point of the story. So, what do I mean when I say that Jesus is willing to allow love to be let go? Well, Jesus understands that his kind of love is costly. It's hard at times. And he knows that not everyone will be able to look within their own hearts and create the internal change that is needed to be a humble, faithful servant of God. But Jesus provides the opportunity nonetheless and leaves the response unconditionally in our hands.

And the rich man, in all of his desire to draw closer to God, can't follow through. He is shocked at what Jesus requests and closes his heart to change. He just can't give up the things he values, the things that he things give him worth and meaning. He says no to Jesus' opportunity because he values the wrong things.

Notice that Jesus doesn't beg him to follow. Jesus doesn't try to rationalize his offer or make it more appealing for the man. Jesus simply gives the man the choice...and Jesus allows him to walk away.

Did you know that in all of our Gospels this is the only story where someone does not follow Jesus when asked? It's the only time an individual walks away.

It makes me wonder, why doesn't Jesus do more to convince this man? And, why won't the man give up what he has in order to follow Jesus?

I would argue that Jesus doesn't try to convince him because the man has to change his desire within his own heart. It can't be forced upon him. And that kind of change isn't an argument that can be won by good talking points. It has to happen because our hearts have opened to

something beyond ourselves. We have to shift what we value. And, Jesus wants to give this man time to come to those terms on his own.

Would you be able to open to God's call in your life when it comes, even if it's inconvenient? Or would you hold so tightly to your conveniences, to your possessions and your accomplishments that you turn away from Jesus' call all together?

What would you value if given the chance?

The reality is we are all given the chance each and every day. We are given the chance when we have an argument with someone we love. We are given the chance when our neighbor is sick and needs a meal. We are given the chance when an older adult can't drive to the grocery store and we have a car and the time to help. We are given the chance when we hear someone discriminating against someone of a different skin color or religion. We are given the chance when the local food bank needs donations.

We are given the chance over and over again to be the kind of faithful servant Jesus so desires. And that will at times involve risk and sacrifice. It will be inconvenient and sometimes it will take money or other resources. But think of the joy that it brings...not just for yourself but for those whom you can make a difference. It's worth the risk of what you might lose in order to gain the heart of Christ.

That's the opportunity. Thanks be to God. Amen.