

ST. JOHNS. October 14, 2018.

GETTING OUR PRIORITIES STRAIGHT Mark 10: 17-31

The stories of Jesus we love to tell, are often about the characters he meets and interacts with. Some of them are really “characters”! I think they may seem “over-the-top” for us, because the Gospel writers like Mark, wanted to grab our attention!

“Listen-up, people...I want to tell you about that foxy little Zaccheus, and that bold woman with a colourful past, who met Jesus at noon by the town well.”

And then there’s this fellow in today’s Gospel, this devout and wealthy Jew who had questions for Jesus, about eternal life. Yet at the time at least, and as far as we know – he couldn’t “process” (as we say today), Jesus’ response to him.

Preachers might never choose texts like this to preach on, because they’re so “close to the bone”. The Lectionary editors must know that we are prone to managing/rationalizing, picking and choosing the texts of Scripture for preaching.

After all, when Jesus talks about rich folk and the eye of the needle e.g., we think he’s obviously referring to those “other people”, because everyone else is better off than us, right?

At times in history, the faithful figured out that being generous to the Church could get you off the hook...”money-laundering for Jesus”! Think “The Godfather,” and the Mafia! The Church knew how to play the game as well.

But back to this character who has come to be known as “the rich young ruler”. Jesus’ new admirer was born and raised a traditional Jew. He was a “Law-keeper”, but even that discipline left him unsatisfied. He still had questions, like...”Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

And basically, Jesus tells him there is too much “stuff” in his life, which creates a barrier to “fullness of life” for him. And besides, implies Jesus pretty clearly, it’s not what YOU do, that’s going to make a difference anyway! Because God will calculate/ determine our just rewards.

The future and our ultimate sense of contentment are always in God's hands. One scholar on this text says, "Jesus is calling him to cast aside all other dependencies. And in radical trust, stand bare before the God who gives."

Jesus didn't have a hang-up about riches, because he knew that many things in a person's life could get in the way of this peace of , our friend in Mark's passage was yearning for...

it could be one's sense of self-importance, or what other people think...

it could be our work, our leisure, our pre-occupations, any of our unresolved – and even unnecessary - "stuff".

My youngest sister – whom we love dearly – is cursed with the need to surround herself with "stuff". She cannot leave home – and she loves to travel – without literally, bags of it! No journey ever ends without having purchased another suitcase en route and/or mailing a box home before she gets there herself!

It can be a metaphor for life!

Yes, Jesus' response was to "go, sell, give, come, follow"...but God will provide a more excellent way...that "more" we are all looking for.

So in spite of the harangues of preachers you have known over the years, perhaps this text reflects neither an attack or dismissal of the wealthy, nor praise of poverty. In simple terms, there are mean-spirited people with little of this world's accumulation of "stuff"...and there are well-intentioned, generous rich folk...and getting into the Kingdom of God will still be a challenge for both!

In light of this conversation, we might do well to take a pause, and consider what we allow to define us, or how we think of ourselves.

For this up-standing religious man we meet in Mark's Gospel, apparently it was his sizeable annual taxable income, which defined him.

For you, for me, it could be anything else we cling to which becomes that “eye of the needle” Jesus curiously refers to.

In all this talk, there is something we can easily miss. For it has been noted that this so-called “rich young ruler”, is the only person in Mark’s account, described as being loved by Jesus: “Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said.....”

And yet Mark goes on to describe how...“When he heard this, (the man) was shocked and went on grieving...” Tragically, he was “allowed” to reject Jesus and Jesus’ solution for his predicament – he asked and Jesus answered him!

We pray, and even when we seem to get a direction, a “push”, we don’t always accept and follow, because it might not be the answer/the way we had hoped to program God into giving us!

Do we hear any more about our friend in Scripture? Not that we know of. We can only speculate, and that’s dangerous – making assumptions and imputing motives to other people when we don’t really know them at all.

I’m always telling myself and imploring, “Lord,. Help me not to judge or criticize, because chances are, I have no real idea what is going on in that other person’s life!” Until I walk in their shoes, etc. etc.!

So Mr. Rich and Powerful may have walked away from Jesus, continuing to accumulate lots of stuff, becoming a grumpy, unhappy old man, even giving-up on the faith of his fathers.

Or he might have continued to be attracted to Jesus and his message, even becoming a “late-onset” follower and disciple!

A friend of my daughter-in-law’s mother came upon some old religious books while clearing-out somebody’s “stuff”, and being the only “religious person” they knew apparently, I inherited a bag-full (I’m thinking of dropping some off in Rev. Jeff’s study while he’s away!) One of these old chestnuts is Harry Emerson Fosdick’s collection of sermons, “The Power to See It Through”.

Now in the first half of the 20th. century, Fosdick was the “liberal’s Billy Graham”, and had a large following. No particular denomination could contain him. He convinced John D. Rockefeller (with friends like that...!) to build the magnificent Riverside Church in Upper Manhattan, NYC. Fosdick was the voice from that pulpit, 1930-46 (in a day when people actually lined-up for evening services!)

FYI...Riverside is an interdenominational church devoted to social justice and progressive in theology. Ten years ago its annual budget was \$14 million and a paid staff of 130 – how’s that for a plant and portfolio!

I digress. With his feet obviously on solid and elegant ground, Fosdick preached a sermon in the midst of the 1930’s Great Depression, called “Ethical foundations of Prosperity”. Text: Matthew 6:33...”But strive first for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things (stuff) will be given to you as well.”

It was Fosdick’s conviction about the unjust distribution of wealth. The economic system – he contended – is not to make money for a few, but to enrich the life of all. Referring back to W.W. 1, Fosdick said:

“Yet I was with those men in France and know how some of them feel. 21,000 new millionaires were made in this country during the war, while those men received a dollar a day for fighting and dying in the trenches of France. Do you wonder they feel a stinging sense of injustice?”

To summarize.....Jesus is not out to deprive us of power and wealth – or any of our other “stuff” – but he asks his people to “get our priorities straight”.

Out of his deep treasury of love for us, he asks us for more...for our very selves...that God and his son, Jesus, might be the subject/object of our faith, and therefore a prime Motivator and inspiration for who we are and what we do with ourselves – and our “stuff” in this world.

Only God is rich; only he enriches.

I was talking to a dear saint this week, whose life has been marked by personal frugality and kind generosity to the Lord's work. The subject of "Heaven" came up and she told me with conviction, "I have absolutely no interest in 'streets paved with gold or jasper (jewel-encrusted) walls – whatever they are!'"

I tried to assure her that I thought (I don't know!) that Heaven for her and for each of us, will be tailor-made to our convictions and dreams and philosophies of life!

Call me old-fashioned, that I like to conclude with Scripture. But I've chosen a contemporary N.T. paraphrase (The Message 1993)...1 Timothy 6:17f.:

"Tell those rich in this world's wealth to quit being so full of themselves and so obsessed with money, which is here today and gone tomorrow. Tell them to go after God, who piles on all the riches we could ever manage – to do good, to be rich in helping others, to be extravagantly generous. If they do that, they'll build a treasury that will last, gaining life that is truly life."

So be it, Lord. Amen.