

**Hebrews 4: 12-16**  
**Mark 10: 17-31**  
**October 11, 2015**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**

The trouble with this story is that it seems to be an “either/or” story. *Either* the rich man goes and sells all he has and joins Jesus *or* he goes home defeated and believing that he can’t follow Jesus. I don’t know about you, but if this is the case then this is a harsh judgment text for me. I have not, nor am I about to sell all that I have. If I am a true follower of Jesus and truly concerned about the long term health of this my beloved congregation, *and if* what Jesus is presenting is an either/or decision which path shall I take? Shall I call up MJ at our house on Cape Cod and tell her that I have finally truly committed myself to follow Jesus and we are selling the house and giving the proceeds to some charitable agency, refuse my salary and pension, liquidate my IRA’s? If this is an *either/or* teaching I will be leaving Jesus grieving. I suspect I would have many of you for company.

But is this really the case? Don’t misunderstand me. I am not trying to weasel out of Jesus’ challenging invitation to the rich man. I am not looking to find an interpretation which lets me have my spiritual “cake” and the wealthy “eat it too.” I believe that affluence and the quest for more and more financial security is the number one killer of authentic spiritual life in the United States. How can we deeply experience the provision of God when we are terrified of losing what we have? How can we truly say “the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” that is, “I have everything I need” when we are so focused on keeping or expanding what we have? How can we truly experience God giving us this day our daily bread when we have food stored away for days to come? It is no accident that so much of Jesus’ teaching has to do with the spiritual danger of wealth. As he said, “We cannot serve God *and* money.”

Indeed Jesus' compassion and advocacy for those who are poor recognized that poverty is as spiritually corrosive as wealth. The rich live lives of despair because they trust in their wealth and do not trust God. The poor live lives of despair because they have no hope and feel the daily humiliation of struggling to get from one day to the next. They are not helped by promises of a different life in the great by and by. They are certainly not motivated by the often punishing attitude of those who see them as "takers."

This may be true. But where does it get us? Are the affluent people sinners whose only hope for salvation is selling all that we have? That message was certainly prevalent when MJ and I were in seminary. And yet, having been brought up in a very affluent church I realized that the people who taught me and loved me into faith were human beings with hopes and fears, generous hearts and deep faith. They felt invisible when the message came that the good news of Jesus Christ was only for the poor. How do you grow in faith when week after week the Gospel is always for somebody else?

There must be another way of hearing this scripture. There must be a way of hearing and responding that keeps before us the spiritual danger of money and possessions while affirming that we are beloved of Jesus. There must be a way that we can leave this encounter with Jesus without feeling judged, inadequate and unworthy.

Of course the first thing that helps us on this quest is that Jesus looked at the rich man "and loved him." The Greek word translated "love" comes from *agape* which means unconditional love. So the first thing we learn is that there is no judgment on Jesus part. The man is already *good enough*. But there is more here. The word love here is a *verb*. *It is something Jesus is actively doing!* This man with all his wealth is not a miserable sinner any more than anyone else is. Indeed just as he is he is actively and passionately the subject of Jesus' divine love. Indeed Mark writes, "Jesus,

looking at him, *loved him and said...*” Jesus’ words to the man are an expression of his active love. There is no test. This is not a moment to discover whether the man is sincere or if his love for God is real: all that is given. It is love—unconditional love which tells the man “You lack one thing.” When we hear Jesus invite the man to go home and sell all he has it has nothing to do with the act of selling everything. It has to do with the fact that as wonderful as this man is, he will never experience God’s peace if he is *not willing* to release all of his earthly wealth and possessions.

The encounter calls to mind Jesus’ gentle yet firm chiding of his dear friend Martha as she was banging pots full of resentment that her sister Mary was sitting at Jesus feet while she was doing all the work. “Martha, Martha! You are distracted by many things! Mary has chosen the better portion.”

And here’s another thing. Jesus does not send the man away. He leaves. Jesus has not condemned the man. In a sense he has condemned himself for he feels that he must choose one path or another and he is too dependent on his wealth to be a true follower of Jesus.

We know that Jesus does not mean selling everything as a rigid rule. After all he was regularly a guest in Peter’s *house*. He went to Martha’s house to flop when he was tired and needed to rest. Yet the disciples are astonished. They think the man has been rejected because he chose wealth over Jesus. What about them? Peter says, we have left everything and followed you! Do I need to sell *my house? Where will my wife and mother in law live?* What hope is there for us if there is no hope for him? What makes us different?

Friends, this morning I want to suggest two things: One that there is nothing that separates us from those who have possessions which prevent them from fully experiencing the Christ’s peace, a peace he says the world cannot give. It is a hard truth that, to the extent that we seek financial security to protect us in this world, we are also isolating ourselves from God’s grace and the joy of

knowing that we can relax in God's firm and tender hands. Listen to your reactions to invitations to support Christ's ministry and honestly examine how you are feeling.

*And, and, and, and, and, notice this: You are here! You are with Jesus! You are a disciple! How can this be if this is an either/or story? On some level you must understand that when Jesus looks at you he loves you—right now with no conditions. There is no minimum amount of money you need to have given in order to be worthy of heaven.*

Jesus knows our struggles. He knows our fears of the future. But he also believes that heaven is here and now. Why postpone the peace and joy of heaven when we can begin to live in his Kingdom now? We are on a journey with Jesus. In his company we grow in trust of God's care for us and decrease our reliance on the things of this world. We will be on this journey until we die. We will never arrive. But as we grow in trust we will, in the words of the Psalm, "see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." It will increasingly become the center of how we live.

If I were to rewrite this story, as the rich man began to trudge slowly away Jesus would place his hand on the man's shoulder and say, "Hey, come back here. You aren't going to find joy and peace by feeling defeated. Hang out with me—with us—contribute your gifts; try giving a bigger portion of what you have away and see if you don't experience what I'm talking about. Amen.