

October 13, 2024

Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost

“Full of Gospel”

Mark 10:17-22

People in our Western culture, even Christian people, are generally disturbed by today’s Gospel reading. When we think about showing love to someone, we think about serving them, giving them gifts and blessing them. We think of making them happy, making their life better; not about making them sacrifice for us. To us it seems that Jesus does just that, demanding everything from this wealthy man who seems genuinely concerned about receiving eternal life.

It disturbs us because we fear Jesus might love us in the same way making a similar demand, am I right? I think I’m right.

We’re kind of shocked that Jesus does this. He doesn’t ease this man along in the faith. He doesn’t ask him to tag along and listen some more and be persuaded. The text tells us that *“Jesus, looking at him, loved him”* (and this is that deep, self-sacrificial agape love), and then Jesus drops the hammer: *“You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”* Jesus asks too much, and the man walks away in sorrow.

A lot of preachers, including myself, use this reading to proclaim how Jesus Christ is to be the highest good and priority in the Christian’s life—how anything that would keep one apart from Christ should be, must be, done away with. I think this is why Jesus is so harsh with this guy. Jesus loves him and knows that his wealth is a snare that will keep him from receiving the reign and rule of God over His life, so Jesus speaks the same truth Yahweh has spoken for centuries. You’ve got to get rid of your idol, wealth, and fear, love and trust in God alone.

That’s all true, well and good. But today I’d like y’all to do some honest self-reflection on how you received this Gospel reading when I first read it. What was it that took the front and center of your mind? Was it the “Jesus loved him” part? Was it the “you will have treasure in heaven” part? Was it the “come, follow me” part? Or was it the “sell all that you have and give to the poor” part?

Maybe some of y’all are more sanctified than I, but for the sixty years I’ve been hearing this passage it’s always the “sell all that you have and give to the poor” part that hits like a ton of bricks and demands my attention. I’m betting it’s the same with you. Right there is reason for repentance.

We hear this passage as the law from a rather self-centered perspective: What do I have to do and what is it going to cost me? Understandable—this is precisely the question the man asks Jesus. But the man is asking before Christ and the salvation He brings has been revealed in the cross and empty tomb. The free grace of God in Christ has not yet been made so plain to him.

We have no such excuse. When St. Mark writes *“Jesus loved Him”* we know the full extent and sacrifice this love entails. When Jesus says *“you will have treasure in heaven”* we know the gifts Christ wins for us remove everything unholy of us that keeps us from eternal life. When Jesus says, *“and come, follow me”* we know this is a divine invitation to dwell in the very presence of God for all eternity. We know all this, yet still it is the potential loss of our earthly mammon that grabs center stage.

Step back and think about it—this passage is loaded with Gospel goods news for this guy. The Son of God is looking upon Him and loving Him! The Lord of Creation is offering him eternal treasures in paradise! God Almighty is inviting Him to follow and abide in His presence!

And the guy is turning away in favor of his cash! We should be inwardly screaming “Turn around you numbskull!” But instead we empathize with his sorrowful dilemma and worry that in a similar situation we might do the same.

Yes, we need to repent. We need to repent by getting our hearts and minds off of the world and focused on the true Gospel promises that we have confirmed in Christ Jesus. This very day Jesus is looking upon you with unfathomable steadfast love and mercy, inviting you to follow Him into the same eternal paradise to which He humanly rose nearly 2000 years ago. The treasures of heaven are your possession today and, at the same time, not yet—but they are yours! How can we be so hung up on the world? Its value can’t even come close to comparing to all that Christ delivers!

In Monday night Bible study we’ve been looking at the memorable folks in early church history. Many of them were willing martyrs for the faith. This past week we read about how two women, Perpetua and Felicitas, went to their deaths with confidence and joy, singing hymns as they were paraded to the Colosseum in Carthage. How on earth could they do so? Simple—they knew God’s promises in Christ were true and were confident that by days’ end they would be with their Savior. They possessed the promise of the cross and empty tomb and were happy, maybe even eager, to give up everything for the sake of Christ.

We have the same Savior, same promises, same faith. And the object of that faith is never what you have to sacrifice for Jesus. It is always that Jesus sacrificed for you! The Gospel is the point! We should see this passage as the outpouring of Christ’s love and forgiveness upon a worldly sinner in gracious invitation, and the tragic inability of that sinner to loose his grip on the passing, temporal blessings in favor of those treasures that endure forever.

This same dynamic carries through in our lives. We should see first and foremost the Gospel promises of God accomplished in Christ and delivered in our Holy Baptism. In this we can confidently claim “the treasures of heaven are mine...today!” In Christ we know we shall live forever in paradise. It’s all good news. Sacrifice? Sure, why not? If this is what God calls for, we sacrifice. We are losing nothing!

There is so much evil in the world and in a lot of ways it seems it all is on the verge of imploding into chaos and disaster. The natural reaction is to look for stability and safety in the world and this brings the temptation to trust in wealth, political power, whatever. This not only causes stress, but can cause us to fall into idolatry—looking to put our faith in these things of the world instead of God.

But when we focus on the Gospel which is Christ crucified and risen, which is our baptism into His death and resurrection, what becomes clear is we’ve got nothing to lose! If the world takes our stuff, our security, our very life away, so be it. We’re fine! We’re perfect! We are forever in Christ.

So if you’re like me and this Gospel lesson disturbs you because your first instinct is to view it as a potential loss in sacrifice, what it is saying is you need to repent, turn from that attitude, and dwell on the Gospel of Christ. It’s all over the place in the reading, and it’s all over you in your life.

When you are disturbed, be it by a call to sacrifice for another, by the perceived insanity of the world around you, or by the selfish, sinful nature that clings so tenaciously to your being, look away toward the Gospel promises of God fulfilled in Christ Jesus. Let His love tear down your idols. Let His mercy blot out your sins. Let His grace assure you that the treasures of heaven, far beyond any of this world, are already yours in Him. In Him you are losing nothing and gaining everything.

Amen.