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First Presbyterian Church
Mark 10:17-31
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“The legacy We Leave: The Money We Spend”

Today wraps up my sermon series “The Legacy We Leave”. We’ve spent the last two weeks looking at the values we leave, and the legacy our values create; and last we talked about our time, particularly how we spend our time -- and how our use of our time, gifts and skills also create a lasting legacy.

Today we are looking at what the church refers to as our treasures; i.e. our money – how we use our money – and the legacy that creates. What are we doing with our money? If someone looked at our checkbook or bank statements or Venmo or PayPal history, what would it say about us? Are we using our money wisely? Are we using it in a way that creates a legacy?

Today is perhaps the hardest sermon of the series, because how we spend our money hits home. There’s something deeply personal and private about it. Polite people don’t discuss money in public, or at least that’s what we’ve been taught. But Jesus discussed it, and so shall we. Today’s passage is a hard one; it just may be the hardest for people like us. And so I invite you to listen for the Word of God as it comes to you today.

Mark 10:17-31

¹⁷ As Jesus continued down the road, a man ran up, knelt before him, and asked, “Good Teacher, what must I do to obtain eternal life?”

¹⁸ Jesus replied, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except the one God. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: *Don’t commit murder. Don’t commit adultery. Don’t steal. Don’t give false testimony. Don’t cheat. Honor your father and mother.*”^[a]

²⁰ “Teacher,” he responded, “I’ve kept all of these things since I was a boy.”

²¹ Jesus looked at him carefully and loved him. He said, “You are lacking one thing. Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me.” ²² But the man was dismayed at this statement and went away saddened, because he had many possessions.

²³ Looking around, Jesus said to his disciples, “It will be very hard for the wealthy to enter God’s kingdom!” ²⁴ His words startled the disciples, so Jesus told them again, “Children, it’s difficult to enter God’s kingdom! ²⁵ It’s easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God’s kingdom.”

²⁶ They were shocked even more and said to each other, “Then who can be saved?”

²⁷ Jesus looked at them carefully and said, “It’s impossible with human beings, but not with God. All things are possible for God.”

²⁸ Peter said to him, “Look, we’ve left everything and followed you.”

²⁹ Jesus said, “I assure you that anyone who has left house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children, or farms because of me and because of the good news ³⁰ will receive one hundred times as much now in this life—houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and farms (with harassment)—and in the coming age, eternal life. ³¹ But many who are first will be last. And many who are last will be first.”

*This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.***

Dear God, we have so very much and we hold onto it so very tightly. Open our hearts and hands this morning with the promise of a love in which we are forever safe, a love we cannot earn or save or hoard – a love we can only accept and then give away. Challenge us, O God, and help us live faithfully and generously the life that really is life. In Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

Some time ago, I read a story about a woman who experienced a dramatic life transformation well after midlife. She ended up changing some of her social habits and even some of her friends. “God’s grace is free,” she was fond of saying, “but it can also be very expensive.” She wasn’t a man, and she wasn’t rich, but I think she got the message of this morning’s Gospel.

As Mark Twain once said, “It’s not what I don’t understand in the Bible that bothers me; it’s what I understand too well.”

Most of us are familiar with the story you just heard, the story of the rich young ruler. The fact that he shows up in 3 of the 4 gospels is a pretty good indication that his story is important, although most of us wish that he had never shown up at all. Because of him, we have one of the hardest sayings in the whole Bible, one that strikes fear in the hearts of would-be Christians

everywhere: “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor; and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

Who is this man and why is he asking a question to which I’d rather not hear the answer? He’s a reflection of us, my friends. As one scholar said, “he could be dressed up and re-presented as a product of American culture and American mainline religion.” Put him or her in a button down or polo shirt, or a business casual outfit, carrying a cell phone, living a good life, working hard, trying to do the right thing – and you have member and friend of First Presbyterian Church.

“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life,” the man asks Jesus. Mark’s man isn’t young like Matthew’s or a ruler, like Luke’s. Mark doesn’t even say he’s rich. He’s just a guy. But he’s a righteous guy. He kneels at Jesus’ feet in a sign of respect; he calls Jesus good (something that Jesus rebuffs), and he’s kept all of the commandments since his youth. He’s desperate to know what more he can do, so much so that he comes running to Jesus with his urgent question.

To which Jesus, looking at him and loving him says to him, “You lack one thing: go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then, come follow me.”

Barbara Brown Taylor says that Christians mangle this story in at least two ways. “First, by acting as if it were not about money, and second, by acting as if it were only about money. It is about money.”

The urge to soften Jesus’ words has been around a long time.

An ancient scribe added words to verse 24 to read “*how hard it **for those who trust in riches** to enter the kingdom of God*, as if the man’s problem is not being rich but putting faith in his wealth instead of putting his faith in God.

A 9th century interpreter made up the idea of a low gate in Jerusalem called “the eye of the needle” through which camels could pass if they’re stooped and unencumbered. Presumably, then, Jesus only criticizes the proud rich. Unfortunately, no gate ever existed.

Countless preachers have said that Jesus somehow perceived that wealth was this man’s particular weak spot, so he zeroed in on it to expose the man’s shortcomings. This interpretation gives us permission to assume that Jesus would never ask us to part with our possessions, just those things that we really do NOT want to give up.

Now, I have to say, this interpretation has a lot of appeal. For one thing, it allows us to be honest with ourselves and admit that all of us have a stumbling block-something that’s getting in our way of being a faithful disciple. And, even if we don’t really want to imagine Jesus uncovering our secrets, there’s something appealing about Jesus gazing into our eyes, probing the depths of our hearts, and telling us plainly what it is we need to do to get through the eye of the needle so we can get to heaven.

But the trouble with this interpretation, is that we have no way of knowing Jesus' innermost thoughts. All we know is what Jesus says, and his words are pretty plain-spoken: just as large animals do not get through tiny openings, so the wealthy do not fit in the kingdom of God. Even a rich man who has successfully kept all the commandments cannot fit.

So what do we do? Do we sell everything we have and give it to the poor? This is what St. Francis did. But he was a saint-most of us are not (no offense). Plus I'm not sure that's helpful in the long run. So a literal reading doesn't make much sense. Plus, we aren't biblical literalists.

So what do we do? We can't throw it out; and we can't read it literally. Which leaves us with only one option: take the words at face value and proceed.

So let's be honest and admit that Jesus' words are tough. He may love the man, but his love isn't "nice". It doesn't prioritize the man's comfort over his salvation. Jesus' love is sharp; it's incisive, as one woman wrote. And even as it offers unconditional welcome, it also offer a mind-boggling challenge.

Imagine how easy it would be for Jesus to secure his new convert by softening his words and tamping down expectations: "What? You've already followed the commandments for years? Excellent! And you're already calling me good? Wow! I'm impressed! You're in!" But he doesn't do that, does he?

Nor does he ease his new convert into the values of God's kingdom: "How about you write a small check to charity this year? Nothing scary, nothing that will break the bank. Just a token?"

But no. Precisely because Jesus does love the man so much, he tells him the truth. Not the half-truth, not the watered down truth, but the whole truth. "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

The challenge of this story is that it doesn't let us do whatever we want and feel good about ourselves. It doesn't tell us the pleasing lie that we're just fine as we are, and don't worry because God's grace will save us. It doesn't say, no wait, don't go. Everything will be fine.

The hard truth is that Jesus lets the man walk away. He honors the man's freedom to make that decision. But it doesn't make the man's decision right.

As far as I know, this is the only story in the Gospels where Jesus invites a person to discipleship and they turn it down. "He went away grieving"; he turned his back on Jesus because of one thing: money. "For he had many possessions," Mark tells us.

As someone once said, ". . . there is no story in the entire Bible more frightening than this one, because I don't want to be that man. I don't want to be the person who misses out on God's kingdom because I can't let go."

Do you?

Friends, on this day when we kick-off our stewardship campaign, it's worth remembering that Christian stewardship is not about how much we give, but how much we keep, and why. What do you want your legacy to be? Do you want to be known as the one who walked away grieving, or the one who chose the life Jesus offered? What will your legacy be?

You know, I've preached plenty of stewardship sermons. Good ones, not so good ones; soft ones, hard ones; ones that thank people and those that challenge people. I've gone at the topic in many ways through the years. But here's the simple truth:

Money translates into ministry and service and witness in the world. It's as simple as that. And the more we all give, the more we can do that. I also believe that in a world ripe with hatred and division and exclusionary practices, a voice such as First Presbyterian's is needed and important. Our legacy matters. I also believe that if we're willing to let go, we can with God's help discover the life God calls us to embrace. Because with God, all things are possible. This is mission worth giving my money to, and I pray you will, too.

The past few weeks we've been highlighting many of the faces of First. These faces and countless others are making a difference in our community and your lives. I have been here long enough to have walked with many of you through very important milestones. Births and deaths and weddings and funerals and baptisms and life-changing diagnoses and divorces and pregnancies and the stuff of everyday life. I know how important this church -- meaning all of the people -- have been to you as they've seen you through difficulties and great joys.

It is impossible to put a price tag on that. But when you receive your pledge card this week, you will. You will decide how much they're worth to you, and you'll need to decide if they're worth passing on to future generations-if this church is worth passing on to future generations. If it's a legacy worth preserving. I believe it is, and I'll be supporting it financially, I hope you will too.

I want to close with a story that's not my own. I think I came across it from Michael Lindvall. It was told by Reinhold Niebuhur, that great American theologian of the 20th century.

It's the story about a young boy, a farm kid who had always dreamed of going to sea. He dreamed of being a deck hand on one of the tall sailing ships of the last century. After years of planning, he slipped away from the farm one night, made his way to the nearest port, and signed onto a great sailing ship as a deck-hand. It was just as he had dreamt it -- until the third day at sea. The captain ordered him up the main-mast to assume watch in the crow's nest near the top. The boy climbed half-way up the towering mast and froze -- afraid to risk the rest of the climb, and afraid of the taunts of the sailors on the deck below if he climbed down.

Now, rather oddly, Niebuhr ended the story there, just ended it with the kid neither up nor down. Of course the boy didn't stay there, half-way up the mast. He either went up to the crow's nest or slithered back down to the deck.

As I complete 5 years here, I've been doing a lot of thinking about where the church is on that mast. I believe wholeheartedly that God always calls us to reach for the crow's nest because God thinks big. As Jesus says today, For God, all things are possible."

As I close in on 5 years here, the other thing I've come to realize is that this is not my church. This is God's church and you, as the members, are its stewards. You are its caretakers. God has entrusted you with a wonderful gift and a gift I believe is worth passing on to future generations so that its stories may live on. This is a legacy worth preserving, and I'm giving my treasure to it and I pray you will, too.

One day a rich man came to Jesus and sought his counsel. Jesus presented him with a choice. That same choice comes to us in some form almost every day. Most every day, "[t]here comes a moment in some very practical and unexpected way when a choice is before us, and without realizing it something of our soul, our character, our being is at stake – you might even say the kingdom of heaven is at stake – and we have to decide, yes or no."

Go, said Jesus. Sell. Give. Come. Follow.

Amen.

Sources:

Barbara Brown Taylor, The Preaching Life, "The One to Watch"

Debie Thomas, "What Must I Do?", www.journeywithjesus.net October 3, 2021