

“What We Do at Our Best”  
Pentecost 19, series b

Mark 10:17-27  
October 11, 2009

He’s young. He’s rich. He’s influential. He’s accustomed to being in control. He can pay for most anything he wants. And if he’s not already married he’s probably got a bevy of female admirers whose hearts throb at the mention of his name. One might assume that he has an ego the size of a barn but, wonder of wonders, here he is humbly on his knees at the feet of Jesus.

At a young age he seems to have life by the tail, but he’s humble enough to admit he needs help with the life hereafter. And wanting to make sure he’s covered all the bases he asks Jesus, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” The question betrays his mistaken theology. He thinks he can influence God like he influences everyone else, by virtue of his own power and wealth. “What must I do?” What is required of me, Jesus? What hoops must I jump through to get myself inside the gates of heaven?

Jesus answers in such a way as to call forth some evidence of humility from this guy who is so full of himself. “If you want eternal life, keep the commandments.” But the man’s answer tells you he doesn’t get it. “Teacher, I’ve kept all these commandments ever since I was a boy.”

Now, if he had an ounce of humility he would have responded, “Keep the commandments? Are you kidding? I do try, Jesus, but I’m not perfect, not by a longshot.”

That’s what the rich young ruler should have said but he fails to admit his imperfection. “Killing? I may have hurt a few people but I’ve never murdered anyone. Adultery? Well, like every red-blooded boy I’ve had my fun but I’ve never slept with another man’s wife. Stealing? I might have shorted a few people along the way but I’ve never robbed anyone. False witness? I pass along a little harmless gossip now and then but never in a court of law. Honor your father and mother? I go visit them every summer.”

Jesus intended to help this man see his own shortcomings. But this yuppie doesn’t get it. He’s like a little boy with chocolate frosting all over his

face trying to convince his mother that he hasn’t touched his birthday cake.

The scripture text says that Jesus looked at the man, **LOVED HIM**, and then pulled the rug out from under this grownup boy’s feet. “Go, sell your possessions, give them to the poor and then you’ll be rich again . . . rich toward God. When you’ve got that done, come back and follow me.”

The young man is totally deflated when he hears it. Give away his wealth? No, he can’t let go. He walks away with his tail dragging in the dirt and with a face as long as a week of rainy days. And not only the rich young ruler, but also the disciples of Jesus when they heard him say, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God.” And Jesus wasn’t just talking turkey he was talking camel. “It’s harder for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

Now, here’s the rub, folks. I hate to tell you this but I need to remind you that most every person in this room is in the top ten percent when it comes to personal wealth among all the peoples of the world. That’s right. You and I are rich people. And Jesus says that it’s very hard for rich people to experience the kingdom of God.

You say, “Wait a minute, all through life I’ve been told to work hard and reap a reward. You get an education and do your best so that you can receive good compensation. You pay your bills and you save for retirement. Now you’re telling me that if I succeed I can’t get into heaven? Then how can I possibly enter eternal life? How can I be saved?”

Now, I was told long ago that there was actually a gate in Jerusalem called the Needle Gate. It was very low and narrow, and a camel could only get through it if it got down on its knees. If that’s true, then what Jesus is trying to tell us is that any rich person can get into heaven but only if they’re humble. By the way, that explanation was made up by Bill Gates and Warren Buffett. There was no such “Needle Gate” in Jerusalem.

Jesus says, “It’s like trying to get an actual, literal camel through an actual, literal eye of a needle.” That would take a very, very, very inventive person and that would also be one very sore camel. Jesus didn’t just say it would be difficult, didn’t say it would be tough, he said it would be impossible! Except for God. Except for God. Except for God. For you and me it’s impossible, but for God? Possible!

Don’t miss the message, folks. Get this straight. Look at me. You can’t save yourself. Not by earning merit badges, brownie points or passing the no-person-left-behind tests. Not through good theology, memorizing Bible verses or giving more money to the church. You can’t buy your salvation. Jesus is very clear. It’s impossible for you and me to save ourselves.

So where does this leave us? It leaves us dangling in midair, suspended like an acrobat between two trapeze. On the one hand you’re clinging to your cherished belongings, your wealth, your possessions, your accomplishments, all the things of this world that charm us. On the other hand God clings to you, demanding your undivided love and devotion while at the same time giving you his own boundless love and devotion.

And there you hang suspended, being pulled in both directions, between God and mammon, going nowhere, until, until . . . you’re dead. And when you die, God will pry from your tight fists every penny, every earthly treasure to which you cling so tenaciously and you’ll go to your grave with the same net worth with which you entered this world.

Then, at last, you’ll rest in the hands of him who left behind the wealth of heaven, left behind unbelievable glory and power and might, taking upon himself the poverty of your human flesh and blood. You’ll rest in the hands of the one who gave it all up and died on a cross so that your failings might be forgiven, so that your future with God might never ever be in doubt. On your own strength it would be impossible, but with God all things are possible through the cross of Christ.

Let it me known. God isn’t going to bring you into his eternity because of any good works you’ve

done. Only a puny god could be bought off with tithes. Only a heartless god would sell salvation to the highest bidder. And only a great and loving God does for his children what they can’t do for themselves.

So, now what? What are you going to do with that good news? What difference will it make in you, a person of wealth, knowing and believing that Jesus blood and righteousness has paid the price of your ticket to heaven? How will you love God with heart and soul and mind and strength? How will you love your neighbor as you love yourself?

Next Sunday I am going be filling out an Estimate of Giving Card to the General Fund here at English Lutheran Church. Not to brag, but I will seek to grow in my giving, because I’m fully aware that money is a spiritual issue in my life. Retirement is just around the corner for me and I’m convinced by the testimony of Money Magazine that the strength of Wall Street and the amount of dough I’ve accumulated in my retirement savings will be the measure of my security. And as much as I believe that to be true, I also believe that it’s a lie. Truly, my security, rests not in my investment accounts but in the knowledge that my future has already been acquired through the merits of Jesus and him alone. What must YOU DO to inherit eternal life? Sorry, it’s too late. It’s already been done for you, by Jesus.

So what I plan to do is to grow in my giving because I want as many people as possible to hear that same good news that I’ve heard, the good news that Jesus has already paid the price of life beyond the grave. It’s not just a matter of my stewardship of the money God has placed in my hands but my stewardship of the gospel. I want others to hear it. I want them to believe it. And I know that this is what English Lutheran Church is all about. Together we pool our resources to make a difference in people’s lives—an eternal difference. For this, I will seek to grow in my giving.

And what is more, I’ll seek to grow in my giving because I never want to take for granted what Christ has done for me. To Him be all the glory. I am grateful, eternally grateful. How about you?

Eugene Peterson writes about the time when he was watching adult swallows trying to get their little swallow chicks to fly:

“One adult swallow got alongside the chicks and started shoving them out, towards the end of the branch, pushing, pushing, pushing. The end one fell off. Somewhere between the branch and the water, four feet below, the wings started working and the fledgling was off on his own, then, the second one. But the third one was not to be bullied. At the last possible moment, his grip on the branch loosened just enough, so that he swung downward, then, tightened again—bulldog tenacious.

“The parent was without sentiment. He pecked at the desperately clinging talons until it was more painful for the poor chick to hang on than risk the insecurities of flying. The grip was released and the inexperienced wings began pumping. The mature swallow knew what the chick did not, that it would fly—that there was no danger in making it do what it was perfectly designed to do.”

Birds have feet and can walk. Birds have talons and can grasp a branch securely. They can walk, they can cling, but flying is their characteristic action. And not until they fly are they living at their best, gracefully and beautifully.

Giving is what you and I do at our best. It is the air into which we were born. It is the action that was designed into us before our birth. Giving is what God does. God gives himself. He also gives away everything that is. Thanks be to God!

Let us pray: O God, who in love has entrusted us with life and wealth and all good things beyond our knowing, grant that we will not be so preoccupied with money that we fail to acknowledge their source; lest having gained the whole world we lose our own souls.