

Sermon for Proper 23, Year B
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“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” A few things must be said about the young man who asks this question. We tend to think of him as “the rich young man”, but that is not how Jesus saw him. All the text says is that “a man ran up and knelt before” Jesus. We find out later that he does have great possessions. We also find out later that he seems to be in earnest. He tries to obey the law. He is a pious Jew. He really wants to know what Jesus thinks.

But he has not come to Jesus as the Lord. He really does want Jesus’ advice. It seems he respects him as a teacher. But this young man has not discerned with whom he is dealing, the Lord of Life himself. He is what we might today call “a seeker”.

So Jesus doesn’t challenge his question as such. He challenges his manner of asking it. “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” It’s a subtle way of leading the young man to the truth. “If I am merely a man,” Jesus is saying, “remember that any goodness I have is derivative, a gift from God. If you really believe I am good, in and of myself, then you must worship and obey me as God.”

The young man thought he was asking a question of a teacher of the law. As if it were a matter of interpretation. And Jesus corrects him by reminding him that life is fundamentally a matter of obedience. “You know the commandments.” And he lists them. The young man has asked a question to which he already knows the answer. He asked for an interpretation of the law. And Jesus tells him that he doesn’t need any more interpretation than he already has.

And yet the young man knows that there is something missing. He says, “Teacher [not ‘Good’ this time], I have been obeying those commandments ever since I was responsible for my own actions.” And he leaves it hanging there, as if to say, “What else?”

“And Jesus looking upon him loved him.” That is a remarkable statement. We often observe Jesus’ love in the things that he does. But it isn’t very often that one of the Gospel writers will stop and comment on the fact. Especially Mark, who is more action oriented. In fact, I don’t believe that Mark has stopped to give us a picture of Jesus’ internal emotions. The word “love” here is still an action word. The point is not that Jesus did love him, or was loving him. He just loved him. He did it, right then.

What did he do? He told him the truth. He told him what he wanted to know but didn't know how to ask. He gave him the missing piece to the puzzle of his life. "You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." That command was Jesus' action of love for the young man. He was enslaved by his wealth, so Jesus tells him to get rid of it. And even though he didn't recognize Jesus for who he was, Jesus gives him the key to freedom: "Come, follow me."

Now, a word needs to be said about wealth and salvation. St. Augustine says this: "Such, O my soul, are the miseries that attend on riches. They are gained with toil and kept with fear. They are enjoyed with danger and lost with grief. It is hard to be saved if we have them; and impossible if we love them; and scarcely can we have them, but we shall love them inordinately. Teach us, O Lord, this difficult lesson: to manage conscientiously the goods we possess, and not covetously desire more than you give to us." There it is. It is difficult for the wealthy to be saved, because it is difficult for them not to love their wealth. And we know from St. Paul's first letter to St. Timothy that "the love of money is a root of all evils."

But note that there is a warning here for the poor as well, and that probably is more appropriate for most of us here today. One can either love money because one has it, or one can love money because one covets it. We may neither glory in our wealth nor glory in our poverty. Caesarius of Arles says to the poor, "Beware of pride, lest the humble rich surpass you."

It cannot have been the fact of this man's wealth that moved Jesus to command its liquidation. But Jesus really saw him and understood him. And Jesus did the only loving thing there was to do. Tell him the hard truth.

Some people actually believe that the task of the church is to make people feel good, to address their "felt needs". Certainly we must try to tell people the truth in ways that they can hear it. But when it comes right down to it, we have to tell people what they need to hear, not what they want to hear. We must require people to act in the way they need to act, not just make them feel good. We may not allow people to get away with half-measures, because our Lord didn't.

For some people it's money. For others it's sexual immorality that binds them, that enslaves them. For others it's power over other people, whether that's at home, at work, at church, or wherever. For some it's a combination. Whatever it is that enslaves us, Jesus doesn't set out to moralize. He doesn't tell the rich young man what he's doing wrong or how awful he is. What he sets out to do is to love him. And, being the perfect Son of God, he gives him exactly what he needs.

The problem for us is that we so often do not recognize love when we receive it. We want so many different things, and all of our desires compete with each other. So when Jesus hands me the one thing that I really need, I sometimes only see that it denies me that other thing that I want so desperately. Ultimately, Jesus gave himself, as the one gift that would be able to stop the madness. And even that gift was and is rejected by many people.

Once again, it is fundamentally a matter of obedience. When Jesus gives himself, it is as the faithful Lord. “If you love me, you will obey my commandments.” He gives himself to us, just as a man ought to give himself to his wife. “I will lay my life down for you, if you will give yourself to me.” There can be no holding back with Jesus. It is all or nothing. Just as it was all or nothing for him. It’s never about money, or sex, or power. It’s always about your freedom.

There is a sad ending to this scene. The young man goes away sad, because he will not obey. He trusted Jesus to tell him the truth, but he still doesn’t want to be free of his bondage to his wealth. He cannot receive the gift of Jesus’ love, because he cannot give himself to Jesus ... yet. But the door is open for him to accept the gift later on ... precisely because Jesus doesn’t bend and allow just a little bit of bondage.

It’s a sad scene, but not a despairing one. As Jesus says to the disciples, “all things are possible with God.” The freedom, and the love, and the power to live truly as ourselves are all part of God’s gift to us, of Jesus’ gift of himself to us. It is always available to us. And it is gift. It is free. But the decision still lies with us whether to take up that gift or not. Day after day, we face the decision: Live as an obedient child of God, or ignore God and pursue my own chaotic desires?

Our job, as the church, is to help each other choose life. And must never, ever knowingly assist people in choosing death, deceit, and unfaithfulness. Jesus will never accept half-measures that lead to spiritual death. He wants you to choose life, because he loves you more than anyone else possibly can. And he wants to give you everything he’s got to give.