

Lent 1a Narrative
Mark 10:17-31
(Hebrews 4:12-16)

March 1, 2020
Salem ELCA
Bridgeport, CT

That Poor Rich Man

How many of you have ever fantasized about being filthy rich or independently wealthy? So wealthy that you didn't have to plan to make the bill-paying schedule coincide with payday?

Have you ever said something like, "If I had half the money that some of the top sports players or entertainers have, the first thing I would do would be to pay off everything I owe, buy a house, retire, travel, and give lots away to my children and set them up for life"?

Wouldn't you like to have unlimited resources not just for yourself but also to have the ability to help make other people's lives better. Wouldn't it be great to be able to dish out millions of dollars to build a hostel for the homeless, or to make a difference in the lives of those people in some overseas village where people are so poor and lack the essentials to sustain life – maybe providing fresh water, electricity, schools, health clinics, an orphanage. There's a certain joy in being able to help others.

(1)

In today's gospel reading we hear of a man who had many possessions. He ran to Jesus and asked for something he could do in order to inherit eternal life. Jesus recognized this fellow's responsible lifestyle; he knew the guy had followed all the rules as closely as was humanly possible. Jesus loved him.

Jesus tested the fellow though. Jesus wanted to know what this man valued most – riches and possessions or receiving eternal life. He challenged the man to give up all his possessions, to sell them and give the proceeds to the poor. Jesus says, "you will have treasure in heaven. Then, come follow me." This guy has followed the rules for so long. Jesus tests him with just one more requirement. And the man goes away shocked and grieving.

There's a lot to unpack in these 5 verses. First, the man thinks DOing something, fulfilling some requirement will get him into God's kingdom. Second, he's so focused on what HE wants to do that he doesn't realize Jesus already loves him. And third, the fellow is shortsighted and afraid.

How many times have you gone to a funeral and heard a comment like, "He was such a good man, I'm sure he's earned his wings." Or "...he's earned his place in heaven" or some such remark? The idea that our near-perfect lives – obeying the commandments, giving to charity, encouraging the underdog, providing adequately for our loved ones – that our near-perfect lives will give us a leg up over the other guy who hasn't lived such an exemplary life, reassures us that someday we will receive the great reward.

We compare our situations to others. Many people need to feel superior to someone else, maybe many someone elses, in order to be reassured they are worthwhile in this world. So, in childhood they need to have the shiniest bike, the best sports record, the trendiest clothes, and the most friends. If they can't have these, sometimes they lash out against others and show contempt, puffing themselves up in their own eyes to make themselves feel bigger and better than anyone else. There's a lot of that going on in our world right now, and it isn't all practiced among children with their bullying behavior.

This poor rich man believes he has

measured up to all earthly requirements and he comes up to this itinerant rabbi and asks advice. Remember, nobody really knew yet that Jesus was the Messiah. The man wants to fulfill all the prerequisites, so he will feel assured his future is all sewn up. He thinks he'll get to heaven because of something HE has done. He hasn't heard enough of Jesus' teaching yet to realize our eternity is a GIFT, a gift of God's grace.

That poor rich man was focused so much on what HE wanted to do that he didn't realize Jesus already loved him. He was already included within God's embrace. He didn't know, yet, that there is NOTHING we can do to earn our way into heaven. He doesn't even realize that he's kneeling in the presence of God's Son, the one who pays the price for every sin in the world – his and ours. He is letting what he THINKS he needs get in the way of what he REALLY needs. And that blinds him to the possibilities of leaving behind all his encumbrances and freely following the One who offers true freedom.

And finally, this poor rich man is shortsighted. He considers himself a self-made man, having obeyed all the rules and acquiring many possessions. So *what* if he gives all his

STUFF away. He, in his position in society, can earn it all back again. In fact, because he shares his wealth, he will become acquainted with people he merely looked down on before. Maybe some of them, the ones he probably had never listened to, might have some great ideas to make him even wealthier than before. But, instead, he is shocked at what Jesus asks him to do and goes away grieving.

He hasn't succeeded. He hasn't made the grade. Maybe the next prophet he consults will tell him what he wants to hear. This Jesus' expectations are just too unrealistic. That was the way it seemed 2000 years ago, and it's still the way Jesus' expectations seem to many today.

Way back then, Jesus knew he was asking a lot of his followers. The example he gave his disciples about a camel going through the eye of a needle shows he realized how difficult it would be for people to choose to serve him. Our Lord's reputation was spoken about far and wide. In a reading from Hebrews, the author says: "the word of God (Jesus) is living and active; sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it

divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account."

Sounds pretty threatening. It almost sounds like "serve Jesus, or ELSE." If we examine our own lives, we may be tempted to measure ourselves against some standard, like the rich man, to see how we how we might fare in the final judgment. But wait, that's what DIDN'T work for that guy. What SHOULD we do that will really make a difference in our lives and the lives of others?

Jesus' advice is that we give up anything that is a burden to us. Give up trying to be better than some standard. Give up focusing so intently on ONE goal that we cannot see God's grace all around us. Give up doing everything the same way it's always been done and look for a challenge, a challenge that will grow your faith and the faith of others.

Focus outside yourself and realize the joy you feel giving. Give yourself away, in thanksgiving for your salvation, and you will have

riches in heaven. Follow the One whose love already surrounds you and let him take your cares upon himself. Your life will be richer when you realize you are already living in the realm of God. Amen

(1) © Pastor Vince Gerhardy, St Paul's Lutheran Church, Caboolture - 10th October 2010, E-mail: gerhardy65@hotmail.com