

Acquiring and Receiving

Sermon preached at the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Marietta, GA

by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, October 14, 2018

The 21st Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 23, Year B) (Mark 10:17-31)

Mark 10:17-31 As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "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." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

of Israel gathered

Right before I graduated from college in 1989, a friend of the family heard I was looking for my first car, and she volunteered to give me one of her cars. It was a 1974 Dodge Colt. It had been owned by her mother until she died, and it was a second car for this friend of the family. She used it only to drive around her large, shaggy, white-haired dog. So when I received it, the car was well-insulated with a half-inch thick layer of fur on the inside.

But oh, that car was a delight to me! Two liters and four cylinders of tiny transportation, a welcome to adulthood and independence. I was so delighted to receive this gift and it brought me a lot of joy. It was such a blessing that when I finally bought a replacement, I sold the old Colt to a friend for \$60, just to cover the cost of a new battery I had recently purchased for it, passing on the delight.

The new replacement was an '88 Ford Taurus that I bought with money I had saved from my first job. I worried over the deal, and later got into a conflict with the dealer when I found a slip in the transmission. I got angry over every scratch and dent, frustrated over every flaw. I had such expectations of that car and never quite got the same joy out of it.

I wonder if part of the problem is like the difference between acquiring and receiving. When we acquire things, we claim a kind of ownership and control over them that builds possessiveness and defensiveness. But when we receive something that is a free gift, we regard it with joy and wonder, delight and openness—and perhaps a desire to give back or to honor the giver by how we tend that gift.

I wonder if the rich young man in today's Gospel reading was so used to acquiring that he had a hard time receiving. He runs up to Jesus and asks him "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit

eternal life?” We learn that the man had many possessions. I wonder if he was looking to acquire eternal life as if it were another treasure to possess along with the rest of his wealth. “What must I do...” the man asks. Does he want to earn this treasure? And yet, when Jesus offers him treasure in heaven, the man turns and walks away grieving.

I wonder if we are more like this rich young man than we realize. Perhaps we are so used to acquiring that we don’t know how to receive, especially receiving the treasures of heaven that Jesus offers. I don’t mean to undermine the value of hard work. No, I am an advocate of diligence and personal responsibility. These are essential virtues in the practice of Christian Stewardship. And yet, we should be careful not to love the works of our own hands so much that we forget the one who gave us our hands and the talents and opportunity to use them.

There is something about acquiring things that cultivates a mindset of control, a mindset of scarcity, protectiveness and even fear. For some, we are drawn to fancy cars. For others, we focus on the latest electronic gadget. For some it is the fine house with the furnishing fit for a fashion magazine cover. For others it is that lightweight, carbon-fiber, bent shaft whitewater kayaking paddle...

For many of us, these acquisitions come at the end of a long road of labor and toil, sacrifice and the investment of time and energy and skill, so we are ready for the reward that we have earned. Sometimes we cling so tightly to our trinkets and feel so possessive of them that we get trapped in a mindset of scarcity. But such a mindset is blind to the treasures of heaven—the gift of eternal life given freely to us!

Look at the rich young man. Isn’t his question ironic right from the start? “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Do” to inherit? How does one “do” anything for an inheritance? To inherit an heirloom, one simply must be an heir. An inheritance is something given, not something earned. Jesus seems to pick up on this when he says to the man “how can you call me good—only God is good.” I wonder if Jesus was slipping in a challenge to the man’s assumptions that following the commandments would earn him his salvation. Only God is good, and God gives eternal life freely to those who will receive it.

So Jesus humors the man at first, listing those commandments that have to do with duty to one’s neighbors. Do not murder, or steal, or commit adultery or defraud or bear false witness; honor father and mother. These, the man claims to have kept since his youth. But what about the commandments that put God first?

Notice how Jesus did not respond. Jesus did not tell him that he worships his wealth and therefore cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. No, Jesus looks at him *and loves him*. He tells the man who has many possessions that he lacks one thing. Jesus offers the man treasure in heaven, but the man walks away. Perhaps the price to pay was too high. And yet what was the price? Eternal life stood before him, loving him! All he had to do to inherit eternal life was to let go of temporal life! All the man had to do was receive the treasure in heaven offered to him!

Jesus told his disciples that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. Some people tell the story of a gate in Jerusalem called the eye of a needle. They say that a camel has to bow to enter the gate, so (as the story goes),

Jesus isn't saying it is all that hard, it just takes a little bowing, a little humility. No, I say that is hogwash. Jesus is talking about a really big camel and a really small eye of a needle. Otherwise, why would the disciples be shocked? They say to Jesus "who, then can be saved?" The disciples themselves are not rich—they have left everything to follow Jesus. And yet, they worry, who can be saved? Indeed, Jesus says for people it is impossible. Not just needing a little humility, but rather truly impossible. But for God, all things are possible.

Living the righteous life to which God calls us requires a lot of discipline and training, a lot of hard work and dedication. We should not miss that Jesus tells the man to give his money to the poor, a message that he gives to us as well. Walking in righteousness is good and life giving for us and those around us. Sometimes we start to feel as if our good works are earning us eternal life. But eternal life—our salvation—is a free gift from God. What if, instead of trying to acquire God's love and favor, we simply received this gift of life that is in front of us?

Receiving is different from acquiring. Receiving is relational, receiving is open and responsive. When we receive a gift, we take joy in that gift, and we tend and care for that gift, not as our own, but something we can share more openly. When someone entrusts us with something, we often take more care with it than we would with something we own. We tend those things not out of fear, but out of love and in response to the trust given to us. Acquiring is about possessing, but receiving is relational—receiving is an act that keeps us connected to the giver with joy and gratitude. And when the gift is freely given, we are more open to sharing from the riches we have received.

This is why stewardship is such a powerful Christian practice. Stewardship invites us to see that all that we have is a gift from God. Instead of things that we have acquired and that we control, we can see all of them as gifts—gifts given to us by God to tend and care for and share.

God gives us our lives, our opportunities, our health, our skills, our time and the talents that we use for our achievements or the wealth we've gained. God gives us our relationships and responsibilities, our families and our friends with all their flaws. God gives us our schools and jobs and neighborhoods. All of these so often depend on accidents of birth and opportunity. Each of them could change in an instant through no fault of our own, and would we be as thankful then?

I invite you to receive the gifts of God. I invite you to receive them—no acquire them, but receive them. Receive your health and stability, your home and community, your wealth and talents and time, your relationships. Receive them not because they are perfect or exactly what you want. Receive these gifts with all their flaws frustrations, just as God receives you with all your flaws. Receive these gifts as ultimately beyond your control, all free gifts of abundance that God has showered on you!

When you practice receiving over acquiring, you will discover more joy, more delight in the imperfect world around you. You will share more freely and generously, and in doing so discover the same joy and love that Jesus had as he looked at this rich young man, loving him. When the Lord of life stands before you and offers you treasures in heaven and eternal life, let go of temporal treasures and receive and share the riches beyond measure that God gives you.