

Sunday September 13th, 2024
Thanksgiving

Mark 10:17-31
“How Deep is Your Thanks?”

I must admit that over the years, I have really taken an interest in the various incarnations of the Sherlock Holmes character, and his trusted friend Dr. Watson. Such as the CBS show *Elementary*, or Robert Downey’s big screen portrayal. I just enjoy so much, seeing the famed detective solve a crime with the most miniscule clues. So, imagine my interest at stumbling across a story, about a time when Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson went camping. As the two men settled down for the night, Holmes said, “Watson, look up and tell me what you see.”

Watson looked up and said, “I see millions and millions of stars”. Holmes asked, “And what does that tell you?” Watson thought for a moment and then replied, “Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Theologically, it tells me that God is great and that we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, it tells me that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell you, Holmes?” Holmes deduced, “Someone stole our tent!” (1002 Humorous Illustrations, p. 73)

I used this little story to prompt in us, and among us, a dialogue. A dialogue birthed out of our Gospel lesson today. I am convinced, more and more, that this passage is often misread, or at the very least misused in its application. Quite often we experience sermons on this passage, or its sister passages in Matthew and Luke, to launch into messages about stewardship. About giving more. Usually, the speaker will commend us to not hoard our wealth but give it not necessarily to the poor as the young man was told by Jesus, but to the church.

I think this whole event is not about money, but about something much more important, and the key comes from us pondering the reasons why people ask questions. Like perhaps many of you, I simply assumed that people ask questions for information. They want to know about something, like why is the sky blue. But I came across an article, written by business writer Jane Northcote, in which she suggests seven reasons why people ask questions.

I cannot this morning unpack the nuance of every reason Ms. Northcote gives for asking questions but in a synopsis, here is what she suggests. 1) They want to know the answer to a question. 2) they are testing you. Something like what teachers do, but so do a great number of other people. 3) They are accusing you. Like mom asking little Johnny, “Did you eat the cookies?” 4) To impose a delay or get people off your back or test your commitment.

5) To express disagreement or disapproval. Like saying, “Are these immigrants necessary?” 6) To exert power. To control the conversation. Salespeople use this tactic often. “Why can you not buy this product?” And finally, number 7. People ask questions to make a statement. Sometimes they want the answer, but maybe they just want to express their concern in a non-threatening way. Like a question that goes, “Why are we doing this now?”

I suspect that maybe there are more than seven reasons, but you get the point. Often when someone asks a question, there is a greater motive than simply the accumulation of information. You know that feeling when someone asks a question, and you wonder about the hidden agenda behind it.

Sunday September 13th, 2024
Thanksgiving

It is prudent to ask oneself when questioned about anything, as to why are they asking me this? So, a rich young ruler, (these adjectives come from combining all three versions of the story in the three gospels in which it is found) runs up to Jesus, and falls to his knees before Jesus. The description of the man indicates that he was from the ruling class and was a man of some means. He would have likely been well dressed, and well known to the locals. The man addresses Jesus as “good teacher”, which Jesus chastises him for.

“No one is good but God”. The young man may have been trying to flatter Jesus, but I think more likely, he had been listening to Jesus and was moved by the wisdom and sincerity of what he heard. Lord was a title of respect likely. So, he asks, from a position of humility, remember he is kneeling, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” That’s the question, so now ask yourself; why did he ask it? What was his motivation here?

Now it is not like people haven’t tried to suggest his motivation. Scholars and preachers have suggested that he wanted to test Jesus. That maybe he was a Pharisee, or another religious leader. Maybe he wanted to challenge Jesus’ presentation about the nature of the Kingdom of God. Jesus had just been talking about receiving the kingdom of God as a little child, and here was a man living a lifestyle that could hardly be seen as child like.

Yet often the motivation suggested by preachers or scholars, has a sinister tone to it. It is all about testing, trapping, and making Jesus look like he is teaching errors. I want to suggest to you today that this rich young man, was sincere in his question. He wanted to know the answer. How do I know he was sincere? Well Mark tells us that Jesus looked at him and loved him. Jesus saw in him the hunger for righteousness that we are all supposed to have.

So, as any good Rabbi would do, Jesus tells him to follow the commandments, which the young man says he has obeyed since his youth, meaning since his Bar mitzvah. The point when a boy becomes a man, and responsible for his own spiritual status. Was he lying? To think so is to misunderstand what is happening here. Most Jewish people would have said the same thing. The Ten Commandments were thought achievable by most contemporary rabbis of Jesus day.

Notice it is after his declaration of keeping the commandments that Jesus is said to have loved him. This man is sincere, and he is a man of honour, and that is where we must stop and see things as this young man saw them. He was a man of honour, and his society saw him in the same light. He must be an honourable man, because his wealth showed that God was blessing him. We do not have the same concept of honour that eastern peoples do, so here is a definition.

Honour is the idea of a bond between an individual and a society as a quality of a person that is both of social teaching and of personal ethos, that manifests itself as a code of conduct, and has various elements such as valor, chivalry, honesty, and compassion. It is an abstract concept entailing a perceived quality of worthiness and respectability that affects both the social standing and the self-evaluation of an individual or institution such as a family, school, regiment or nation. Accordingly, individuals are assigned worth and stature based on the harmony of their actions with a specific code of honour, and the moral code of the society at large. (Wikipedia)

Sunday September 13th, 2024
Thanksgiving

Shame therefore is the opposite of honour. In Jesus' culture, honour and shame were like commodities. You could gain honour or gain shame. This young man was a man who had not only wealth, but he was seen in his society as honourable. He had worth and respectability. But here is the problem. Despite his status in society, and despite doing what was expected of someone of his honourable status, he recognized his own wanting before God.

In his exhausting effort to maintain his status in society, he feared for his status before God. So, logically he asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" If he wanted to enhance his social standing in society as he knew it, he would do something. It was easy for him to figure out how to get honour in his culture. What that would be, would depend on whatever effort would increase his honour the most. The closest equivalent I could come up with in our current society, might be those who donate large sums of money, and get buildings named after them.

In the eyes of his peers this man is a good guy. He would be the kind of neighbour everyone would want. The kind of man you would want your daughter to marry. In worldly terms, he's got it nailed down.

So, in answer to the man's need to have good status, or honour with God, Jesus tells him he lacks one thing. Here it is, the missing piece of the puzzle. "Go, sell what you have and give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me." Give away his money and follow Jesus." Now here is the point for this man. The giving away of the money, although it was an effort, or a work, was not what gave him eternal life.

You cannot earn your way into eternal life. What Jesus is asking him to do, is sacrifice, give away, the one thing that is giving him status or honour in this world, to gain honour in the next. Can you set aside those things you think makes you valuable, special, important in this world, to build up treasure in heaven? Whose honour is more valuable to you? Elsewhere Jesus said, "What does it profit someone if they gain the whole world but forfeit their soul?"

We read that the young man went away grieved, because he had a great number of possessions. The honour he had in this world was just too important to him to let it go. What is also interesting is that this incident caused a crisis among the disciples, who saw the man's enthusiasm, and yet he walked away from Jesus? Even in the disciple's eyes this man was top drawer. A prime candidate for recruitment.

It shook the disciples to the core. If this guy isn't good enough, what about us. We are not rich. We are not from the ruling class. In social status we are not important. I mean we are fishermen, and my goodness there is even a tax collector among us. Therefore, insecurity explodes, as Jesus then goes on to talk about the grasp wealth has on people, and how hard it is for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God.

In other words, what we believe gives us status in this world and maybe it does, does not mean one iota of value in the Kingdom of God. So, the rich young man confronted the question we all face; whose opinion of us matters in the long run?

Sunday September 13th, 2024
Thanksgiving

In whose eyes does your status ultimately matter. You may be an honourable person in your community, but are you honourable before God?

The insidiousness of the influence of wealth upon those who have it is aptly illustrated by Jacob Loewen in his account of a seminar on worldview which he conducted for some Indian teachers and their missionary colleagues several years ago. He explained to the group that each culture has at its center an “axle” from which radiates all the “spokes” which hold the wheel together and help it perform its appointed tasks smoothly and without undue difficulty.

Wondering whether he was getting through to the teachers, he asked them to name the hub around which the (foreign) missionaries’ way of life revolved. “Money!” was the unhesitating and unanimous response from the group. The missionaries were visibly taken aback. Asked by the slightly incredulous Loewen how they could be so sure that money was the axle of the missionaries’ worldview, the Indian teachers recounted incidents which in their eyes were clear proof that money was at the core of all material and spiritual aspects of Western missionary life and work.

“What about your fathers and grandfathers before the missionary and the white man came,” Loewen continued to probe, “what was the axle of their way of life?” “War,” came the immediate response. Spokesmen within the group explained that their grandfathers had practised killing because that was the way to get spirit power. Spirit power had been, in effect, the integrating hub of their grandfathers’ way of life.

Had their grandfathers been Christians, the teachers explained to Loewen, the Spirit of God would have been the center of their lives, “because He...is the most powerful of all spirits.”

“And now that all of you are Christians,” Loewen persisted, “is the Spirit of God the axle of your Christian way of life, too?” “No,” came the response, “our axle now is...money...because that is what we have learned from the missionaries.” – Jonathan Bonk, Missions and Money

But there is another critical point being made in this passage that we must not overlook. Remember I said the disciples became unglued by what Jesus said in terms of camels and eyes of the needle. They ask the obvious question, “Then who can be saved?” If a man like the rich young ruler is outside of the Kingdom, who can ever hope to enter it? Can you not feel the anxiety here?

Peter even interjects here that the disciples have left everything to follow Jesus. What about us? Are we on the outside looking in? Look at us Jesus, we have left our homes and families to follow you are we savable? Leaving your families, giving away all your money, carries no weight in the admission requirements for the Kingdom of God. “For mortals it is impossible.” Yikes! But here is the good news, the heart of the Gospel.

For mortals gaining eternal life is impossible, but for God; what does it say? A few things are possible; most things are possible. No! Jesus says that for God all things are possible. Yet, we cannot gain eternal life on our own, what must we do as the rich young man asked. We do nothing but receive. Eternal life is a gift, an act of grace on God’s part. We don’t deserve it; nor can we work to achieve it.

Sunday September 13th, 2024
Thanksgiving

But like all gifts, our hands or in this case hearts, must be empty to receive it. You cannot receive God grace, if you are holding on to the world's cares, the world's goods or the world's honour.

In other words, there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, and nothing I can do to make him love me less. The problem we saw demonstrated by the rich young man, is that instinctively we feel we must do something to be accepted. That we must act to prove our fidelity and our love. Much like a suitor buying flowers or gifts for the one whose heart he or she is trying to win.

But earning love and acceptance is tiring, and it's never very secure. You're always wondering if you've done enough. Or you are always living on pins and needles afraid of offending your object of affection. In other words, you hold no confidence in the relationship. It was this insecurity the rich young man was feeling, and likely the disciples as well, in this passage. Dare I say maybe we too feel this same anxiety from time to time.

Everything in this world runs on ungrace as Phillip Yancy calls it. How people feel about us or how they value us depends on what I do or don't do. Not so in God's Kingdom. Our value is not determined by what we do or don't do, but by his grace, because unlike the world, with God all things are possible.