

## Sermon for October 14, 2018 – “Share”

Text: Mark 10:17-27 (28-31)

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There once was a rich man who was near death. He was very grieved because he'd worked so hard for his money and wanted to be able to take it with him to heaven. So, he began to pray that he might be able to take some of his wealth with him. An angel heard his plea and appeared to him. “Sorry,” the angel said, “but you can't take your wealth with you.” The man begged the angel to speak to God to see if He might bend the rules. The man continued to pray that his wealth could follow him. The angel reappeared and informed the man that God had decided to allow him to take one suitcase with him. Overjoyed, the man gathered his largest suitcase filled it with pure gold bars and placed it beside his bed. Soon afterward, he died and showed up at the gates of heaven. St. Peter, seeing the suitcase, said “Hold on, you can't bring that in here!” The man explained to St. Peter that he had permission and asked him to verify his story with the Lord. Sure enough, St. Peter checked it out, came back and said, “You're right. You're allowed one carry-on bag, but I'm supposed to check its contents before letting it through.” St. Peter opened the suitcase to inspect all the worldly items that the man found too precious to leave behind and exclaimed, “You brought pavement?”

What is it about need to own things? to possess things? things that always seem to end up possessing us? Why does it not occur to us that the things of this earth are not meant to be held onto but to be given away? This is the central point of this morning's gospel reading. It's one of the more familiar stories of the New Testament and one of the most problematic for preachers. It's a story about how the things we possess trick us and how easily we choose to be tricked. Jesus will not oblige us in our self-deceit, however, any more than He obliges a rich and selfish man. It's the only story in Mark's gospel that tells about somebody who refuses to follow Jesus and for that reason alone we should sit up and take notice. Why? Because it means that the reason the man used to excuse himself is likely going to be the same reason that many of **us** use. The man approaches Jesus with a question: “**Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?**” It's a question which reveals much, and Jesus knows it which is why Jesus responds the way He does. This is a man who can afford the luxury of asking questions about the eternal life to come because he doesn't have to worry about his life **now!** He's secure in the knowledge that he has everything he needs, and he simply wants to know how he can deserve **more**. The Greek word translated as “inherit” is interesting here in that the man would choose that particular word. It appears in Luke's version of the story and it means exactly what we think it means! This man assumes that eternal life is something he can acquire the way he's no doubt acquired his wealth. It's the way we begin to think when we become possessed by the things we possess. “The more I have, I deserve, therefore, I deserve to have even more.” Which is where Jesus stops him dead in his tracks. Jesus reminds him of the short list of the commandments. Not the first four which deal with our relationship to God, but with the last six which deal with our relationship to our neighbor.

At first reading it sounds like an uncharacteristically conventional thing for Jesus to do. Jesus quotes the Law to this guy reminding him of his obligations under the Law with one notable exception. Anyone catch it? It's right there, plain as day, in verse 19. You can "google it" for yourself. Jesus is quoting the commandments from Exodus, chapter 20; "You shall not murder... You shall not commit adultery... You shall not steal... You shall not bear false witness..." So far so good, right? But, then Jesus does something that no one could have seen coming. Instead of adding the next commandment, "You shall not covet..." Jesus changes it and says to the man: "**You shall not defraud...**" You shall not...wait! What? "You shall not defraud" – that's not right. So, the question is, why? Why, you might ask, would Jesus want to go and do a thing like that? Why replace "You shall not covet..." with "You shall not defraud"? Well, remember the young man's question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Some might say that it's a fair question, one any of us might ask, right? Of course. We all want to know how to get to heaven! But here, you see, is where **context** becomes important and there are two things we need to understand. Material wealth was distributed very unevenly throughout the biblical period. A small number of people owned a vast proportion of the land and resources while most people lived in relative poverty. The concept of a large middle class is a relatively recent and largely Western phenomenon. The wealth of the elite was almost always based on extensive land holdings usually gained in one of two ways. The first was through inheritance. Now, since the other gospel accounts note that the man is young it's safe to assume he inherited most of what he owned since acquiring wealth in those days took many years. We can also assume that when Mark says, "he had many possessions..." he meant that the man "owned lots of land..." that he "had many properties."

But there's still more to this because of the second way the wealthy obtained more land and that was by seizing your neighbors land if he couldn't pay his debt. So, it's reasonable to assume that if you were wealthy and had "many properties..." it was at the expense of other people. It was no accident, then that Jesus edits the commandments for this man's benefit. Jesus knows why the man is wealthy the way anyone would have known. And, Jesus wants the man to know that to get right with God means giving back what doesn't belong to him. When the man misses Jesus' challenge the first time and claims to have obeyed all these laws including the new one not to defraud, Jesus says, "Fine. Prove it." He tells the man after looking at him lovingly, "**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.**" But Jesus' response proves to be the man's undoing. It's too much for the guy and he turns away "**...for he had many possessions.**" Jesus goes on to say, "**How hard it will be for those who have wealth 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.**" It's a statement which means exactly what it seems to mean which is that the only way in to heaven is to share. The only way to be fully and completely human is to let go of the material things; things that are in the long run, only temporary. There's an old adage which says the tighter we try and hold on to something the more it slips through our fingers.

I think that's true in just about every facet of life including church. Like anything else material goods, to the extent that they are for us symbols of wealth, status, power, and so forth and to the extent that we value them no matter what they are, is still just stuff! And, as the rich man found when he tried to bring gold bars into heaven they're absolutely worthless in the long run. Nevertheless, we think our stuff's ours. The same is true of our time and talents. But to think that any of these are ours, that we've earned it on our own is self-deception at best, at worst, it's borderline idolatry. Jesus wanted us to see a better way. It's probably why He talked about money as much as He did. So, here's the question. What if Jesus said to us what He said to the rich man? What if Jesus walked in here right now and told each of us to sell what we own and give the money, all of it, to the poor? I imagine some might say... "All of it?! Whoa, what happened to one-tenth? Now we're supposed to give it **all** away? When did the rules change?" I know I'd ask to at least be able to keep my iPhone and iPad, and maybe my big screen TV! But seriously... We like to think we're virtuous people, don't we? We're keepers of the law right? We're faithful observers of the church's rites and keepers of its facilities and traditions right? ...most of the time anyway. I mean, we haven't cheated or defrauded anyone...we haven't – have we? Probably not, but here's the thing, when it comes right down to it how attached are we to our present way of life? How attached are we even to our stuff? But it's not just the amount of worldly goods we possess that becomes the problem. It's the difficulty we have in rising above them, looking **beyond** what we have so that we can be **free** from it!

A gift is meant to be shared. We don't always get that. We don't always get that there's an abundance of life that cannot be hoarded, only shared. Everything – **absolutely everything** – is a gift from God. We don't always get that, either, and so ultimately what we have isn't ours to **possess** but to **share** so that all may benefit. We are called to generous living under God's gracious care. Those who are given plenty are given it for a reason; to share with those in need. Scripture reminds us that from those who've been given much, much will be required.

I conclude with Paul's words to Timothy, "**Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.**"

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.