

“Do the Right Thing: Turning Loose”

Salado UMC—Preaching Text: Mark 10:17-27
20th Sunday after Pentecost: 10 October 2021

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“The inherent vice of capitalism is the unequal sharing of blessings;
the inherent virtue of socialism is the equal sharing of miseries”

--Sir Winston Churchill (1874 - 1965).

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Hear the day's lesson:

[17] As he 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?" [18] Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. [19] 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.' " [20] He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." [21] 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." [22] When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

[23] 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!" [24] 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! [25] 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." [26] They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" [27] Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible" (Mark 10:17-27).

Possibly we never say it out loud; after all we are modern and urbane people. Yet, in the back of many minds, those who desperately want to trust God's goodness, lurks a question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Doubtless we pose the question in diverse ways. "Karl Barth once said that people come to church with only one question on their mind: Is it true? The providence of God, the saving power of Jesus Christ, the comforting presence of the Holy Spirit, the resurrection from the dead, the forgiveness of sin: Is it true" (*A Chorus of Witnesses*, Eerdmans, 1994, p.268)? Barth's question mirrors our text's query: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Before we can develop theology of stewardship, we need a theology presupposing God as the provident owner of all. We yearn for eternal life, referred to in the Synoptic Gospels as the Kingdom of God or Heaven. From his affirmative answer to Jesus' claim about God's commandments, the man appears to have met his duty. He admits that he has "kept all these [commandments] since my youth." Jesus then drops the hammer: "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." The man departed without a word.

We can self-righteously guess, "He was possessed by possessions." Yet who of us is not? In our orbit of severance packages, mortgages, car payments, school bills, compensation packages, pensions, and insurance, we are frauds if we think

our possessions do not possess us. Yet, could it be otherwise? We have to put food on the table, don't we?

Of course, Jesus spells out for the disciples exactly what his teaching entails. Jesus speaks of wealth and Jesus speaks of camels. In the end the disciples have but one question: "Then who can be saved?" After professing to having left everything for Jesus, they seem hopelessly troubled. The shocked man who asked Jesus about eternal life departs grieving. The disciples remain, but no less troubled. Yet, we ask the question about "eternal life" or "who can be saved" or "is it true." Our question hangs over us like Damocles' sword.

When Jesus tells the disciples that "for God all things are possible," Jesus offers a way out of the dilemma. When the man poses his question, the operative word is "I," as in "what can I do?" Yet Jesus reveals his divine wisdom by indirectly teaching these disciples that all is absolutely dependent on God—even human striving. A faithful appreciation of stewardship gets this: God is the owner of all, while we only borrow for a time the gifts God offers.

Stewards gain confidence knowing that whatever gifts we bring to God's Realm, whether great or small, God multiplies our offering like Jesus multiplies the fish and loaves (see: Mark 6:33-44 and parallels). So, whatever we offer, God increases. When God provides, even by our hands, then there will always be enough.

Eternal life is God's gift to us. Our lone task is to receive God's bounty and then, pass along the gift.

When in Germany at a conference this past summer, my former teaching colleague (see: *Edgy Exegesis*, Alyce Mackenzie, 9 October 2012) suffered a retinal tear and needed laser surgery in a small town near Rothenberg. The doctor told her, in great politeness, to take it easy for several weeks. No jogging, no lifting anything over twenty pounds, and no flying for two weeks. The jogging part didn't present difficulties, as Alyce wasn't going to suddenly start doing something she never did anyway. But the flying part and the lifting part presented problems. She needed fly home to Dallas, and had to carry a suitcase and backpack. So, when it came time to pack to return home, it was time to discard everything she could. She left her smaller backpack, umbrella, shoes, jacket, and bulky sweater—in short everything she could do without on the trip home.

Perhaps this is not a bad image for the Rich Man's plight. He needed to discard his wealth, in part because it was what was putting pressure on his life—causing anxiety and not adding a single cubit to his life. It was a treasure that occupied where his heart was supposed to be. It was mammon that kept him from serving God. It was the worldly gain that exposed his soul. It was the bulk that made him too wide to get through “the eye of the needle” (Mk. 10:25).

We know many forms of baggage that demand our wearing a sign that says “WIDE LOAD.” We need to leave each behind when we follow in Jesus’ Way. For James and John, it was prestige (Mk. 10:35-40). For Peter, it was fear, fear of Jesus’ risky, sacrificial future and fear that he, as a follower, would somehow share in it (Mk. 8:31-33). The Pharisees load was demands for signs of Jesus’ legitimacy and the craving for security (Mk. 8:11-13).

The church presents us with opportunities for giving again and again, year by year. One would be pretty dense to not recognize that as a group we can do much more together than we can as individuals. It is simply a reality of life that every church needs faithful folks to “do the right thing” in order for our congregation to do our work both within and outside our walls.

Yet there is another truth at work here. The saving your soul for eternal life is part of the matter of giving in general. When we come to the altar and join the church, we pledge our loyalty to the church of Jesus Christ in this time and in this place with our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. Keeping our vows keeps us grounded to a real and authentic life in God through Christ. As Psalm 37 reminds us:

The wicked borrow, and do not pay back,

but the righteous are generous and keep giving (Psalm 37:21).

David Neil Mosser, SUMC, Salado, TX 76571