

## PROPER 23, PENTECOST 20, YEAR B, OCTOBER 10, 2021

Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor ... and come and follow me," Jesus said. "How hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." I think when we hear these words we automatically believe that Jesus isn't talking to us but the one percenters who have millions of dollars to spare. So, we think we're safe from this admonition from Jesus to sell our possessions. But are we?

As threatening as this passage can sound there are people who have done exactly that. St. Francis literally did what Jesus called for and one day stripped himself naked in the public square and gave away everything he owned to follow Jesus.

Most of us would say this is impossible to do today but so did the people in Jesus' day. After all, in the Jewish tradition, wealth and prosperity were signs of God's blessing. If what I have is a sign of God's blessings, why would Jesus say to give it away? And aren't we called to work, invest, create, and enjoy the fruits of our labor? If That's true, isn't having money a good thing?

In a book called *Money and the Meaning of Life*, philosopher Jacob Needleman says that the one professional today who knows our souls most intimately is no longer the minister, the physician, or even the therapist. Who do you think it is? It's our accountant or tax preparer. And he talks about a CPA friend who describes her work as a real ministry, seeing herself as a "priest-accountant." "When I see someone's financial records," she says, "I'm seeing their lives, their contradictions, hypocrisies, hatreds, pettiness, phenomenal cruelties, and their incredible wishful thinking." Our money becomes the expression of our souls.

According to a study, people's inflation-adjusted income tripled from the 1960s to the first decade of the twenty-first century, but the percentage of Americans who describe themselves as "very happy" went down significantly. The study concluded, "If material well-being leads to happiness, why is it that the crew on the flagship of capitalist affluence is becoming increasingly addicted to prescription and street drugs and drugs for falling asleep, for waking up, for staying slim, and for escaping boredom?"

Somehow the prosperity and spending of American consumer society hasn't delivered on its promise. Writer Anne Lamott, who at one time had been homeless, spent years working toward the day when she would have enough money. "I imagined," she said, "that if I just got to a certain level of solvency, I'd be okay. I'd stop thinking about it. Then I got to that level and discovered that the drug of choice is called 'more.' I always think, 'Oh, if I just had a certain amount of stocks. If I just had some real equity in this house. If I just had a trust fund. If I just had this or that, then I'd be okay.'

"But you know," she says, "it's got to be an inside job. You can't own it or amass it or capitalize on it and think that it's going to fill up the God-shaped hole inside you."

Jesus is saying that even wealth can become an encumbrance to the life of a Christian. We tend to think of wealth as liberating, why else would so many people buy lottery tickets each week? Surely if we had the money we wouldn't have to go to work, or have to worry about anything and we could devote ourselves to being a philanthropist doing God's work. But it never seems to work like that, does it?

After all when you look at this rich young man, who apparently had enough material wealth, he still realized something was missing from his life. He is consumed with a longing for more. You have to love this young man. He's eager, earnest, successful, living

the good life. He knows his life is fine but feels there's got to be something more so he's drawn to Jesus. He tells Jesus he's kept the commandments, he's honored the tradition, and practiced the rituals but he's still hungry and feeling unfulfilled. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" the young man asks. This isn't about life after death. Eternal life for Jews was how you lived your life, based on God's world order. This is the eternal life Jesus talks about. It's being fully and deeply engaged in loving God above all things and working diligently for the welfare of others, meaning the poor, the marginalized, outcasts, foreigners, enemies, even when it is exceedingly difficult.

Now, imagine how easy it would have been for Jesus to tell this potential new convert by tamping down expectations: Congratulations you're already following the commandments and calling me 'good'? I'm so impressed! You're in!" But he doesn't.

That's when Jesus "looks at the young man and loves him," and we realize Jesus's love doesn't prioritize the young man's comfort over his salvation. His love is provocative. It's incisive. It's sharp. Even as it offers unconditional welcome, it also offers mind-boggling challenge.

Precisely because he loves the young man so much, Jesus tells him the truth. Not the half-truth, or watered-down truth, but the whole truth: "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."

It's a staggering invitation for the rich young man to strip down, to simplify things, to decide to live his life on a different set of priorities. Jesus is inviting him to follow him and to see what a God-filled life for him might mean but he just can't do it.

Mark tells us that the young man is "shocked" by Jesus's invitation, and goes away grieving. I imagine he experiences shock because he considers his wealth a reward from God, not an obstacle standing between him and God. How terrible to be told that his best credential is in fact a liability and a burden. How frightening to discover that money is never a blessing if we feel a need to hoard it. I imagine he grieves because he realizes that he doesn't actually want the kind of life Jesus is offering as much as he thinks he does. He's hungry but not hungry enough. He doesn't trust enough to relinquish the treasures he has on earth. He doesn't really want to follow Jesus; he wants to admire the "good teacher" from a comfortable distance, and go on living as he has always lived.

And when Jesus makes his point by saying that for a rich person to get into the kingdom is as hard as squeezing a camel through the eye of a needle, his point is blunt: Wealth is a problem. The problem is that your wealth is preventing you from beginning to live. You're bogged down, encumbered, absorbed with all your options and all your things. There's full, abundant life out there for you, but your wealth is preventing you from living that way.

The point here is not that everyone needs to sell their possessions in order to get right with God. What Jesus is really saying to all of us about money and our possessions is that when you let what you own, own you, it's really hard to realize how much you need God and other people.

Jesus is telling us that we need to find what it is in us that's a stumbling block--a detriment--to our living as children of God, and then do something about it. If we have many material possessions, we may need to see how we use them to help those less fortunate than ourselves. If we hold on to attitudes or prejudices that exclude others then we need to change our ways. If we've become so wrapped up in our own wants that we're

no longer careful of our world or its people, then we need to look again at our call to stewardship. We need to do this as individuals, and we need to do this as a faith community. It takes prayer, honesty, and a serious decision to want to live as a people of God.

We have a choice. We can walk away shocked and grieving like the man in today's Gospel whose wealth and possessions truly owned him, or we can get on with the work of really living as God's people by being fulfilled and letting our hearts, feet, hands, eyes and thoughts continually move towards God. It's our choice. Amen.