

GIVING IT ALL

Psalm 90:1-6, 12, OT p. 547
Hebrews 1:1-3; 4:14-16, NT p. 218
Mark 10:17-31, NT p. 46

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“Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.... From everlasting to everlasting, you are God.” “Let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” “For God all things are possible.”

We’ve heard words of comfort this morning, and in light of this week, we need them. God is forever. God is merciful. God gives eternal life. When our world is shaken, we need these words of reassurance. We can depend on God, who walks with us through the hard places of life. Even when God seems silent, we can trust.

Words of comfort – and yet in the gospel reading, there are also words of challenge. The rich man evidently didn’t trust that the Lord would provide. He had come running to Jesus, though it wasn’t dignified for a grown man to run. He knelt, though it wasn’t at all proper for a rich man to kneel before someone of a lower class. And he asked his question. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” He didn’t have it quite right, because a person doesn’t have to do anything to receive an inheritance. You just have to be in line to inherit when someone else dies. But Jesus goes along with him. “OK. If you want to do something to have life, keep the commandments.” Notice that all the commandments Jesus lists have to do with how we treat other people. “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.”

“Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” This rich man sincerely believed he had done all he knew to do. But it probably hadn’t inconvenienced him too much. After all, he probably hadn’t considered murdering someone. He hadn’t strayed from his marriage. He didn’t need to steal, although in the world view of that time, if someone was rich, he had some of what rightfully belonged to other people, because there was only so much “stuff” in their small world, and it really ought to be shared equally. Maybe the rich man fudged a bit on the definition of stealing. But he seemed to be sincere when he claimed to have kept all these commandments.

Then Mark tells us that Jesus looked at him in love. The rich man might have missed that look, so he was shocked when he heard the words of Jesus, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” As he confronted the requirement to “go, sell, give, come and follow,” he made his decision – he turned and walked away. The requirement was so high, he tuned out anything else Jesus might have told him. He couldn’t let go of his possessions, because they defined him. He couldn’t trust the mercy of God or the new life Jesus offered.

The story of the rich man is so familiar, it’s dangerous – dangerous because it has quit disturbing us. It doesn’t disturb us first, because we’ve convinced ourselves that we’re not really that rich, most of us. Oh, we know we possess more, have more to eat, live in better houses, than two-thirds of the world’s people, but we’re not **rich**. We don’t have high status or a great deal of power, most of us. We certainly don’t try to impress people with how religious we are, do we? Sometimes I think we go too far the other way, and try to show our

non-church friends that we're no different than they are. We're not like that rich man, and so Jesus isn't really speaking to us.

Second, the story doesn't disturb us because we're quite sure Jesus was just exaggerating to make a point. He might actually have asked a few people to give up everything, but that was only for those folks, and maybe for Catholic priests and nuns who take vows of poverty – but their church takes care of them. Jesus certainly wouldn't say the same thing to us, would he? After all, we need our income, our homes, our retirement, our insurance – that whole safety net that our money and our possessions provide. We have to be responsible for ourselves and our families. If we gave everything away, that wouldn't be fair to the rest of society. Jesus wouldn't ask that of us in the twenty-first century.

Third, we're not disturbed because we probably have given up at least a little something. We make and keep a pledge of financial support to the church, or at least put some money in the offering plate when we come. We give up Sunday morning sleep or sports or travel to come to church, most weeks. We help out with a committee or bring food for HELP or serve as a Fix-Byterian. We pray for people on the prayer chain. We try to live a moral life. We're quite sure we're meeting God's requirements for us.

But this story is dangerous, because we assume we know what it meant for that rich man and what it means, or doesn't mean, for us – and that may not be the case at all. Maybe Jesus really did mean it – give up what you have and follow me. Maybe we really do have something to give up. And maybe what we've already given up isn't enough. This story is dangerous, all right, because when we really hear it, it challenges us where we live.

The question becomes, not “How much do I have?”, or “How much am I required to give up?”, but possibly “Whom do I trust, and how much?” The rich man had extra stuff. He could have afforded to give some of it away without suffering hunger or cold or disgrace. In fact, his position would have required him to be generous. It just would have been very odd, even unthinkable, for him to give it all up to follow Jesus on the road. He couldn’t do it. He depended on his position and wealth to define him and keep him safe.

We’ve heard, twice lately, about Jesus challenging his followers to become like children, in order to be part of the kingdom of God. You might have different ideas about what child-like characteristics we should have – enthusiasm, spontaneity, willingness to follow, simple faith, or as I mentioned last week, vulnerability. Life was not at all certain for children, not even if your family was rich. We know from personal experience that regardless of our possessions, life is still uncertain. If this story of the rich man is an example or a warning, as I think Mark intends it to be, the challenge is whether we can give up protecting ourselves and our stuff, because we’re vulnerable anyway, and trust God.

Christ calls us again – “Go. Sell. Give. Come. Follow me.” If this call is really the most important thing in our life, if our relationship with Christ is paramount, if our dedication to God’s work is genuine, we will be able to let go of what holds us back and trust God for the future. We will recommit ourselves to the work God has called us to do. Think of the blessing that rich man could have been to his community! We too can be a blessing.

What might that mean for you? It could mean giving more time to community service. It might mean finding ways to share your faith with a family member or neighbor. You might realize that God is calling you to make a more serious financial commitment to the

work here where you are nourished spiritually or to God's work in some other place.

Certainly following Christ will mean less dependence on what we have and more trust in the one who calls us.

The people around us don't live forever. Our family members have their own problems; they aren't always available to help us with ours. Sometimes life with its uncertainties seems impossible. But not for God. "For God all things are possible." "Let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." "From everlasting to everlasting, you are God." This is the One who calls us, the One who keeps us, the One who sends us out, the One who looks on us with love. "For God, all things are possible."

Let us pray. Loving, forgiving, challenging God, in Christ you call us to leave behind all that would keep us from you. Keep us poor enough to identify with the poor, and humble enough to walk with the despised. Save us from our dependence on what we have, so that we may travel lightly through the world, showing your generous love made known in Jesus Christ. Amen.