

The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost B 2024
October 13, 2024
Mark 10:17-31
(Sermon by the Reverend Michelle Manicke)

Yesterday we laid to rest our oldest member, 104-year-old Irene Wolfe, at Zion Cemetery. Afterward, we held a memorial service here at Zoar. It was a day for sharing tears and hugs, as family and friends acknowledged their loss. At the same time, it was also a day for savoring smiles and laughter over shared stories, and it was a day for finding peace in the words Jesus surely spoke when Irene crossed over from this life to the next, “Well done, good and faithful servant!” As usual, Zoar’s faithful funeral team provided their usual gracious hospitality, which was much appreciated by those who loved Irene.

After everyone had gone home, I took some quiet time to reflect, as is my practice following a memorial service. And because I’m a preacher who’s been thinking about today’s gospel reading all week long, two thoughts sprang to mind: One was the title of a play I saw as a young child, “You Can’t Take it With You.” Now, I don’t remember the plot line at all, but I do remember recognizing the truth of the title even though I was only in elementary school! In a similar vein, the other thing that sprang to mind were some simple, yet profound words I once heard one of my mentors, Pastor Ross Merkel, speak in a funeral sermon way back when I was in seminary. Pastor Merkel said this, “We’re born into this world with nothing, and we leave it with nothing, except our faith, and that makes all the difference....”

So, I want to take a poll: How many of you agree that it’s our faith that makes all the difference in both our living and our dying? [show of hands!...] Yeah, I mean, that’s why we’re here today, right?! But here’s the thing, friends: If you and I honestly believe it’s faith that makes the difference, why is it that we and so many other people of faith spend so much of our lives chasing after money and material things, as if they could somehow provide us with the freedom and security we long for, or perhaps even with the power and influence we covet? The short answer is: We do this because we really like our stuff! And while wealth isn’t necessarily bad in and of itself, it tends to distort our vision and deceive our hearts. We may think we’re in control, but in reality, we can become so attached to our wealth that we end up worshiping it as a false god. So, if you ever attended confirmation class, you might remember Martin Luther’s teaching that faith makes a god or an idol. With his usual bluntness, Luther declared that whatever your heart clings to—that is your god! Luther warned us about this because worshiping false gods is dangerous to our spiritual wellbeing. You see, unbeknownst to us, the false gods we worship can hold us captive and prevent us from entering into the fullness of life God wants to give us through a loving, living relationship with Jesus Christ.

Right about now, some of you might be feeling kind of squirmy or maybe even flat-out irritated by what I just said. Perhaps you’re thinking along these lines: “Now, wait a minute! We’re just a bunch of middle class Lutherans, who aren’t truly wealthy, so why is Pastor including us in this description?!...” Since you asked, here’s my answer: I included us for two reasons: 1. because you and I actually are quite wealthy by worldly standards; and 2. because Scripture consistently calls us to take the log out of our own eye rather than worrying about the sliver in our neighbor’s eye.... As I was pondering all these things in preparation for this sermon, it occurred to me that most of us probably have more in common with the rich man than we’d care to admit. Let me use

myself as an example. So, there I was, working on this sermon while sitting in my comfy armchair in my warm living room, surrounded by cozy and beautiful things that I enjoy and sipping on my peppermint tea. And as much as I love Jesus, I have to confess that if he asked me to give up these things in order to follow him, I'd feel pretty sad.... What about you, friends: If Jesus asked you to give up your creature comforts in order to follow him more faithfully, how do you think you'd feel? How do you think you'd respond? If you and I are honest with ourselves, I think we'll have to admit that it's kind of hard to know how we'll actually respond until the moment comes.

And that brings us back to the man who comes to Jesus with a sincere question, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" His conversation with Jesus reveals that this man is a person of faith who is truly hungry to go deeper in his relationship with God. He tells Jesus that he's kept all the commandments since his youth, and Mark tells us that Jesus looks at him and loves him. But notice that Jesus doesn't say, "Good job! You've got this!..." No, because Jesus loves this man, he doesn't let him off the hook. Jesus wants his would-be disciple to receive the gift of abundant life, so he tells him pointblank what he's lacking. As Jesus sees it, the man's possessions have become a false god that's taken possession of him. Jesus lets him know that this presents a stumbling block that's impeding his ability to grow in faith, and in order to overcome this obstacle, he needs to sell everything, give the money to the poor, and then come and follow him. Mark the Evangelist tells us the man is shocked by Jesus' words, and he goes away grieving.

Hmm...you know, I can't help wondering what lies at the root of the man's shock and grief. One answer might be: poor theology – that is, perhaps he subscribes to the popular, but questionable view that God showers blessings on those who faithfully live out the commandments in daily life. This was actually a fairly common belief in Jesus' time, and I think it still has quite a following in our day, especially here in the United States, where it's known as the "prosperity gospel." Talk about an oxymoron: "prosperity gospel!?" Personal wealth that elevates some at the expense of others has nothing to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ! And yet...this false gospel has a lot of adherents in American churches today. It also permeates our culture in insidious ways. For example, how many of you have ever seen something like this on social media: "Share this prayer, and God will bless you with riches?" [show of hands...] Or how many of you have ever turned on the TV and heard a televangelist say, "If you donate money for this mission, God will multiply your blessings a hundredfold?" [show of hands...] Friends, God is NOT a cosmic Santa Claus, and these things are NOT biblical! From the prophets of old to the book of Job on up to Jesus himself, the Bible is very clear about two things: 1. Bad things can and do happen to good people for no apparent reason; and 2. Money or wealth is a huge spiritual problem for us human beings. As I mentioned in my email reflection yesterday, there are more than 2000 passages in Scripture that speak about the temptation and danger of wealth and money. Two of the most familiar spring instantly to mind: In 1 Timothy 6:10, we read, "The love of money is a root of all evil," and in the gospels we hear Jesus say, "You cannot worship God and Mammon" – "Mammon" being the Aramaic word for "wealth" or "money...."¹ Friends, when human beings are seduced to run after the glamour and power of wealth, we turn away from God, and our souls become impoverished. To say it another way, when you and I pile up possessions and put them on a pedestal, we create an idol, a false god that gets in the way of our ability to know the one true God revealed through Jesus Christ....

Turning back to our gospel reading, it's important to bear in mind that we don't know for sure how the story of the rich man ends. All we're told is that he's shocked and goes away grieving

¹ Cf. Matthew 6:24 and Luke 16:13.

because he has many possessions. As I've said, perhaps he's always viewed his wealth as a blessing from God, and that's why he's shocked to learn he must give everything away in order to receive his heart's true treasure. Looking at it from another angle, the man's shock and grief may also be part of his own dawning awareness that giving all his money to the poor will take him down a peg and put him on the same economic and social footing as his neighbors. In short, if he does what Jesus is asking him to do, it will turn his whole life upside down and inside out. So, it's understandable that he leaves this encounter with Jesus shocked and grieving... BUT many of us know from our own experience that there's another way to look at this man's situation: We know that shock and grief are not static states of being. We know that with the passage of time and with the help of God, who is always present with us and for us, we can eventually move through shock and grief to a new place that God will show us. So, I wonder: Could it be that God will work through this man's shock and grief, leading him to prayerfully search his heart until he comes to see that the true treasure lies on the path of following Jesus? Could it be that once he gets to a place where he can see with the eyes of his heart enlightened, perhaps this man will hunger to do what Jesus bids him to do: namely, to sell everything, give the money to the poor, and having nothing, he will then follow Jesus on the way to possessing everything...²

Again, Mark leaves the ending of the story open, just as he does with the story of the resurrection in chapter 16. There we read about a group of terrified women who flee from the empty tomb. The narrator comments, "They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."³ But we know they eventually did have a change of heart and tell others the good news of Jesus' resurrection; in fact, you and I and Christians all over the world are living proof of their witness! Let me also remind you that Jesus himself says, "With God all things are possible..." Speaking of terrified women who receive unsettling revelations from God, in our Bible study on Thursday morning we were talking about the incarnation, and I realized that the words Jesus speaks to assure his disciples are essentially the same words the Angel Gabriel speaks to Mary, when he brings the seemingly impossible news that she's going to bear God's Son. Gabriel's words assure Mary and us that we should obey God's call because God's Word will not fail us. As Gabriel observes, "Nothing will be impossible with God..." Applying this truth to today's gospel reading, we can say that since nothing is impossible with God, this man, whom Jesus loves, may well come to have a change of heart. In time, perhaps he'll manage to break free from Mammon's stranglehold, so that he can then receive his heart's true treasure: the gift of abundant life that is ours through Jesus Christ.

In closing, I have bad news and good news for all of us. The bad news is: You and I cannot do anything to "earn" the things God has entrusted to us. And the good news is: You and I don't have to do anything to "earn" the things God has entrusted to us!... All that we have and all we are is a complete and total gift entrusted to us by God. And I say "entrusted" quite intentionally because as God's people we must never hoard God's gifts for ourselves. The gifts you and I have freely received from our loving Creator are meant to be freely shared with others, as you and I follow Jesus' call to participate in the God's ongoing work of healing and reconciling this world God loves so deeply. So, here's my prayer for all of us today: As we leave this sanctuary, may we go forth nourished by Word and Sacrament, and may we be bold witnesses to the impossible love of God that makes all things possible, so that all may come to know Christ and the abundant life that is in him. Thanks be to God! Amen.

² Cf. Ephesians 1:18 and 2 Corinthians 6:10.

³ Mark 16:8.