

Sermon October 13, 2024, St. Michael's Church, The Reverend Joshua Wong

*Let us pray: "May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer." Amen.*

Today's Gospel scene takes place when a man excitedly runs up and kneels before Jesus asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. There are parallel stories to this one found in Matthew and Luke. In Matthew, we are introduced to a successful young man who was also interested in following Jesus, and like the one in Mark, discovers that Jesus' value system was not the same as theirs. Similarly in Luke, Jesus is confronted by a young rich ruler who asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

In today's Gospel, as well as the one in Luke, Jesus says to both of them, "One thing is lacking." In both incidences, their moral lives measure up relatively well by human standards. They don't commit all the things that Jesus asks for, but Jesus still says, "One thing is lacking." You see, their lives were relatively good, but God is not relative, God demands an absolute. So, these men ask what they need to do beyond what they have already done. Jesus responds with three commands and a promise. 1.) Sell all they had; 2.) You must give to the poor, and 3.) You must follow me. The problem is not merely that they needed to divest themselves of their wealth for the health of their souls, but that there are poor people in the world who desperately need what the rich men have. Jesus is

not presenting this dilemma between them and God, but also the poor, the practical problem that is right in front of them. Helping the poor was not a matter of putting an ideal into practice, but was the real crux of personal discipleship with Jesus—the willingness to let it all go. Jesus isn't teaching them to divest their wealth for the sake of learning how to be a humanitarian, but it was to learn the lesson of letting go of what they are trusting in and holding onto. The ethics of the Gospels is not about humanitarian principles of “good works,” but is about our faith in Jesus as the Christ, and our commitment to following him.

Then Jesus makes a promise to them. “You will have treasure in heaven.” We need to be clear here—The ethics of the Gospel is not the same ethics of Prosperity theology. Unlike some churches who teach Prosperity theology, the goal of following Christ is not about financial gain or even personal gain. Prosperity theology spans beyond wealth, but is about whether we see Jesus as our Santa Claus or a Genie in a bottle that comes to our beck and call. “Jesus, if I do this for you, please do this for me.” Instead, being a disciple of Christ means that, “When we follow Jesus, and release our hold of what we possess, we are willing to orient our life to God’s kingdom that is already manifested in the life of Jesus. In Hebrews, orient means, “Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”

It is important to know that these parallel passages was not about Jesus disliking those who are rich. In the Gospel today, the man did not announce that he was powerful or rich when he ran up to Jesus, but Jesus knew him already—that his possessions were possessing him.

May we then ask ourselves, what are things in our lives that holds us back from fully trusting Jesus? Possessions don't necessarily have to involve money. They can include our ego, our dependence of status, or our need for power, control and recognition. Jesus directs this question uniquely to each one of us. What am I holding onto that needs releasing?

The Gospel continues, "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." Jesus reaches for an image which is absolutely unattainable. There is no rational explanation and those who heard it got the idea. And that's exactly Jesus' point. The man was as good an example of human achievement as we can present; yet he had a sense that something was still lacking.

And that lacking can only be filled from Jesus. God's salvation comes only through the impossible by humans. "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit

eternal life?” No one is good but God alone. Human beings, even the best, are only relatively good; God is the only one who can be called good in the absolute sense. Here Jesus temporarily does not place himself in the same category as God but identifies with sinful humanity for the sake of the cross. God does not merely make up our lack, but God justifies the ungodly. God’s love through the person of Jesus Christ covers all our lack and considers us his beloved children once and for all.

In this passage, Peter says to Jesus, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” This indeed is the central idea of being a disciple and this is something the rich men would not do— Relinquish the holding on to their possessions.

Jesus does not ask them to relinquish their possessions because Jesus wants them. Instead, Jesus knew that if they were willing to relinquish their power, they would gain “A hundred fold in this life and in the age to come.” But they had to let go and trust solely on God in order to experience fullness of life. This requirement was the best for them. This reminds me of the passage from Matthew we spoke about many weeks ago—““No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”

Once again, Jesus is not about disliking those who happen to be rich or powerful, but only asks them, “Who is the Lord of your life?” Are we willing to release and trust? This requires us to discern the value system of God versus our own.

Our life in the twenty-first century teaches us otherwise. Jesus’ teaching of Sell what you have, Give away what you have and follow him is opposite of the famous bumper sticker in the 80’s, “He who dies with the most toys wins.” So, why would Jesus asks us to do this today? For fullness of life. This is not a strategy for how to become wealthy after all, but it is a picture of life in the Christian community, the family of God, where Jesus’ disciples are brothers and sisters and share their property, and no one is in need. For us today, the world needs to see Jesus in our way of compassion and generosity.

The lesson of having a generous spirit is frequently found in the Bible. It is seen in the parable of the widow who had two last coins compared with the wealthy pharisees who walked by the offering plate and gave a tiny fraction of what they possessed. Generosity was found in the parable of the Good Samaritan who stopped and helped a total stranger who was dying by the side of the road, and took him to an inn and paid for whatever the man needed in order to recover. This was compared with the many “religious” passerbys, who left the dying man

because they were late to the temple.

Jesus reminds us and the rich young men to let go of our clenched fists, because we think we will run out of resources for ourselves. This scarcity mentality is still very prevalent today and is not from God. We can not trust in money. God reminds the Israelites over and over again not to trust the gifts, but the Giver of those gift, that is God himself. Our possessions, our houses, our bank accounts are perishable, they are gifts from God, we are stewards of God's gifts, but if we trust only in them for security, we will be disappointed. Just a change of luck in our lives can change the outcome, God asks us to trust in the giver of those gifts, God himself. It's about fixing our eyes on what matters.

Very importantly, Jesus ends today's Gospel story by telling us that whoever has sacrificed their possessions for him will not be without, instead, they will receive a hundredfold now and in the age to come eternal life. Do we believe this?

I saw exactly this in the life of my own parents. John, my father, gave up his engineering job in Hong Kong to become a pastor. When we immigrated to the United States, he became a full time pastor in Santa Barbara. Completely living by faith with no financial support, he and my mom, Pearl, relied on God to feed

five children, by serving the forgotten immigrant Chinese families and students along the coastal cities of Central California. I saw the sacrifices they made, often living month to month by faith. That is why when God called me to ministry, I was extremely reluctant. Yet, if you were to ask me how they were to describe their lives, I would say it was spiritually rich and abundant with absolutely no regrets. Not by earthly definition BUT by definition of eternal life. No amount of money would equal what they are leaving behind in the world. At my father's funeral, there were over 500 people who flew in from all over the world to pay their respects to a man of service who changed their lives. This is what a hundred fold blessing in this life and the world to come means. And today, I am so grateful and honored that God called me on this same path, and that we are on this journey together..

During this time in our lives, we too should feel honored to be saved by God's grace and be partakers of a promised, abundant life. We should also be grateful that God led us to the St. Michael's family, a place that lives and teaches grace, built on the shoulders of saints and angels. The founders of this parish followed the call of Christ. 1. Sell all you have, 2. Give to the poor. 3. Follow me. And we are living Jesus' promise, we are building up treasures in heaven. The founders first started by giving their time, talent, and treasure for us to be here today.

This week, Dan and Momi sent me something they shared with the church a few years back about what this parish means to them. They allowed me to share part of it with you. What especially touched my heart was what Momi wrote:

“Coming to church has always been an important part of my life even during the time that Dan was a Christmas – Easter Christian and I went by myself. Coming to St. Michael’s brings me a sense of completeness that’s missing when I’m not able to come to church. Even when I was working the night shift and would get off at about 07:30 in the morning, I would TRY to drag myself to meet Dan here for the 08:00 service. I’m not saying that I would remember much of what was said but it was important to my spiritual being that I get here. Thankfully those days are over and now I wake up early on Sunday morning, eager to participate in the early service. The positive feelings I get are a real boost. Another area of participation that I’m learning to enjoy is proof reading and editing the rough drafts of Dan’s sermons. Sometimes during the process, we have some lively discussions which I think helps to sharpen the focus of the sermon. I like that we regularly get to go to the 10:00 AM service not only to hear Dan’s sermon again but also to get to sing!



Our Gospel reading is about the costs and rewards of discipleship. The rewards of discipleship are communion with God and each other. It is in communion with each other that allows us to flourish. Whenever we are present here, we are challenged and strengthened in our discipleship.

We learned in our Catechism that the purpose of our church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.

God has marvelous plans for us at St. Michael's and I am excited to be on this journey together and to witness God's powerful change. As we begin our Stewardship Sunday, I pray you will answer God's unique calling for you. How can I give my offering of time, talent and treasure to God?

Amen.