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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 23B)

October 11, 2015

Text: Mark 10:17–22

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Today, we're introduced to a rich, young ruler. That's the composite picture we get of this individual from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. From Matthew, we learn that he's young. From Luke, we learn that he was a ruler of the Jews. All three gospel writers mention that he was rich. And that's the common element that the three evangelists share in their retelling of this event in Jesus' life. How you relate to and think about your wealth and material resources often says a great deal about how you relate to and think about God. Wealth and riches often serve as indicators of your spiritual health or sickness, as the case may be.

Let's look more closely at this encounter between Jesus and a rich young ruler. According to vs. 17, "a man ran up and knelt before Jesus" and asks a questions. I like to imagine the man speaking in a rather breathless voice since he came running up to Jesus. This unnamed ruler of the Jews is eager to find Jesus. You almost get a sense that he must talk to Jesus before he leaves town. His question is that important and so he throws aside the normal decorum for an upstanding, leading citizen of the community and runs up to Jesus. Jewish leaders in those days didn't go running around town; it just wasn't proper for his station in life. He is reverent and respectful, however, for he addresses Jesus as "good teacher." The 12 apostles must have been excited to see what was happening. Finally, a rich, educated man was about to join their ranks as a disciple.

But things don't turn out that way. In fact, at the end of this episode the disciples will be left scratching their heads, wondering what went wrong.

Let's take a closer look at how Jesus and this rich, young ruler interact with each other. Kneeling before Jesus, the man asks (vs. 17), "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" That's a very curious question. Two things should be noted about this question. First, it's a bit awkward, bordering on rude. The man asks how he can "inherit" eternal life. To inherit something means to receive something as a gift resulting from the death of someone else. Usually, children inherit the property of

their parents or other close relatives. It would be like someone coming up to you and saying, “What can I do in order to get into your good graces so that when you die I can get some of your property.” It’s a sincere question no doubt, but a bit imprudent. It probably reflects how he got his own elevated status in Jewish society. He inherited it from his family.

The second thing about this question is that it assumes he can, in fact, do something. What must I do? – emphasis on the “I”. The rich man is posing a Law question, you know, the 10 Commandments. How much of the 10 Commandments, must I do in order to earn eternal life? Have you ever asked yourself that question? What must I do to be saved? What must I do to be born again? What must I do to be a Christian? No matter how you state it, it’s a Law question that puts the focus of attention upon you and your works.

So often, how we frame a question will dictate the kind of answer we receive. Jesus responds to the man’s Law question with a Law answer. Vs. 18–19, “And Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.’” Jesus has just recited commandments 4–10, the 2nd table of the Law. These are all the commandments that speak to how we relate to one another as human beings. If you’re interested in what you can do to be righteous before God, then turn to God’s holy commandments.

Listen to how the rich, young ruler responds, vs. 20, “Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.” Do you hear the unspoken question? All these I’ve kept, is there anything more? Is there more?

That’s where questions which focus on your good leave you. In doubt. This rich man knows the Law and has been doing his very best to keep it. But it only drives him to ask more questions. What else? Is it enough? When do I know it’s sufficient? Can it ever be lost once it’s obtained? And so forth. Trusting in your own good works will never bring assurance and godly security. That can be found only in someone else, as we’ll see.

Verse 21 is so very important. “And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, ‘You lack one thing. . .’” Let’s stop there. Jesus looks at this man, and with His divine insight sees this man for what he is and where he is. And our Lord loves this rich man. What Jesus says next, He says out of divine, perfect love for the young man. Vs. 21,

“You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”

Can Jesus really be serious? To be a disciple, must the rich man sell everything? Yes. For all the rich man’s keeping of the 2nd table of the Law (commandments 4-10), he was failing miserably in keeping the 1st table of the Law (commandments 1-3). Or, to put it bluntly, this pious rich man has a false god; he worshipped an idol: his wealth and his good works. Jesus knows this and reveals it to the rich man. The Large Catechism (I:2) helps us know who our god really is:

“A god means that from which we are to expect all good and in which we are to take refuge in all distress. So, to have a God is nothing other than trusting and believing Him with the heart. I have often said that the confidence and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol.”

The rich, young ruler’s gods were is wealth and his good works. That’s what Jesus’ teaching reveals about the man. Those dark, sinister idols had taken up residence in this man’s heart and soul. The Lord Jesus calls this man to repentance. Get rid of those false gods, for they cannot give you what you desire, and come follow Me. Only I can give you what your heart truly desires.

Mark tells us what happens next (vs. 22), “Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.” Do you feel the impact of those words? Set before this rich man is the way of life and the way of death. And he chooses death. Placed before him is the living God who loves and saves and dead idols of self-chosen works and wealth. The rich man chooses the idols.

Did the rich man really have to give up his wealth? Yes. He did. Must you and I give up all our wealth? Yes. We must. The Scriptural teaching on wealth is particularly difficult for us 21st century Americans to hear. For we live in a nation whose material prosperity is unheard of in human history. I do not exaggerate when I say that not only do you and I have more wealth and prosperity than most people living today but more than most people in human history!

Our wealth, including our investments and retirement plans, our vacation destinations, our self-made security, our self-reliance and dependence, must be abandoned in order to follow Jesus. The call to Christian discipleship is to die to yourself and live toward God and your neighbor in faith and love. Must we begin tomorrow liquidating all resources and assets? If you fear, love, and trust in them above all things then yes. But

you must know that you and me, and all Christians, are called to something much more difficult. To live like nothing we have is ours. To live like all things belong to God and our neighbor. Our lives, from beginning to end, are not our own. We belong to God. It's no longer about what I can do to be saved but what God has done in Christ to save me. He calls the shots; He's my God from whom I expect all good things. So, if that means giving away money, then that's for my good. If that means, serving my neighbor in love, then that's for my good and for the good of my neighbor.

And so we follow Jesus, in all His goodness, to His cross and empty tomb by way of baptism, confession and absolution, preached Word, and holy Supper. Day by day Christ's children live and walk in the power of His Spirit given to them freely. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Nothing!! Jesus did it all for you and me. He gives us eternal life because He is good, loving us into His holy family so that we now possess the exalted status of being children of our heavenly Father. We are born again into God's holy family through God's holy Son, Jesus Christ, and so share in His eternal inheritance. That's what it means to follow Jesus, to trust in Him for every good thing.

So we joyful hearts, let us come and follow Jesus. And may it be fruitful to God's glory and for the good of all people.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.