

OCTOBER 15, 2006
RADICAL DISCIPLESHIP & OUR MONEY
Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close, Grace Church, Haddonfield, NJ

An old church building was in need of repair, so the priest decided to address it in a sermon and ask for \$100,000 to fix the problem. During the service, the priest looked directly at the richest man during the appeal. After he ended the sermon, the rich man stood up and said, "Father, I'll pledge \$5,000." Just as the man sat down, a piece of plaster fell from the ceiling and struck him on the head! The man jumped up and said, "Father, I'll make that \$10,000!" He sat back down as a satisfying murmur rippled through the rest of the congregation...and then it happened again! A piece of plaster fell from the ceiling and struck the rich man on the head again! He let out a yelp, jumped to his feet and scream, "I'll double that pledge!" He hadn't sat down when he was struck yet again. He hollered, "I'll make that \$50,000!" When the deacon heard this, she looked up to the heavens and shouted, "Hit him again, Lord!" (From Beliefnet.com)

Well, if you haven't figured it out by now, it's getting close to stewardship time and the subject is money! We are the rich man sitting in the pews. We are the ones hearing the Gospel talk about money. What is it going to take to get our attention? What has to hit us on the head before we stand up and make our pledge? This is not my favorite time of year. I am always filled with a mix of feelings: hope and anticipation mingled with frustration and disappointment. This is the time of year when people either start making excuses to me, or just start avoiding me! We have a Vestry and Stewardship Committee that have worked very hard to show us what we are being called to do...but have our attitudes about giving to the Church really changed? Where are the stories and examples of conversion and transformation?

What about our riches, our possessions and our wealth? We are given insight this morning how they can be an obstacle to Christian discipleship. What does it mean to follow Jesus? What does Jesus expect us to do with our money and material things? Today's Gospel outlines a stewardship of wealth. As a Christian, our first concern is to decide what it will take for us to FOLLOW JESUS!

The message of our culture is contrary to the idea of stewardship. I particularly loathe the bumper sticker that says, "He who dies with the most wins." There's a television commercial on that captures this in another way. I don't know whom it's for, but there is an older man standing to a younger one on a fishing pier. The older man asks the younger, "What are you after?" The camera moves back and we see the younger fisher has multiple fishing rods hanging over the pier. He replies, "I want it all!"

Our culture tells us that we can have it all. After all, we deserve it...we are entitled to it all! The billionaire, J. Paul Getty, once granted a reporter an interview. They toured his vast estate; they talked about his wealth of holdings and money. At the end of it all, the reporter turned to the billionaire and said, "Mr. Getty, how much is enough?" Without missing a beat, Mr. Getty responded. "It's just a little more than what I have now." Isn't that our attitude today? We want just a little bit more than we have. We are never satisfied with what we have. And yet, we live in a country where we have more than most of the rest of the world. What's wrong with this picture?

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Today's Gospel challenges not only the rich young man that approached Jesus, it is a Gospel addressed to us today. The way of discipleship is costly. In being confronted by Jesus we are asked, "What is the most loving thing we could do with our money and possessions?" This is one of those hard sayings.

In Mark's Gospel, the rich young man (that's us, by the way) comes to Jesus. We know that Jesus is on a journey. The use of the word journey means that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He's going to confront the religious authorities and to die on the cross..for us! Why did the rich young man come to Jesus? Did he really want to become a disciple? Was he seeking affirmation or approval? We don't know his motive. He said that he was seeking eternal life (or as is said elsewhere, the Kingdom of God). Perhaps he thought he had earned his way in..we just doesn't know.

Jesus responds to the rich young man by asking him if he knows and has kept the commandments. It's interesting to notice that Jesus only mentions six of the commandments, the ones that have to do with our relationships with others. (The other four, the first four, have to do with our relationship with God). The rich young man says that he has kept all these! We might even think that it wasn't so hard to do! It would be interesting to know how the fellow might respond to the higher demands of a relationship with God!

What we do notice is Jesus' response...he loved the man! Jesus sees a promising young person. He sees a seeker, and probably more! But that love means something more. Jesus, out of love for this man, challenges him to take the next step. He makes a demand of the rich, young man. Out of love, we tell those what else is required of them..so it is with Jesus. Jesus says to him, "You lack one thing." Oh oh! Here it comes! Any time you meet Jesus and he says, "By the way...there's one more thing." watch out! What did the rich young man expect? Praise? You're on the right track? What's this, there's something more?

What does Jesus demand of us? What one more thing do we have to do? What one thing is keeping us from being Jesus' followers, disciples? We need to listen carefully to the story as it continues to unfold and ponder what will be asked of us! Soren Kierkegaard, a theologian, once said, "Christ has many admirers, but few followers." What is it going to take to move us from admiring to following?

Jesus says to the rich, young man, "Sell all you have, give to the poor and come follow me." Jesus calls for radical stewardship...radical trust...and a radical new way of life! Jesus confronts the young man with the obstacle that was between him and his relationship with God..his wealth. Jesus has the ability to quickly point out to us what needs to change in our lives to be one of God's community. It's what the rich young man needed to hear..but not what he wanted to hear. He goes away very sad..and misses the promise that Jesus holds out to him.

Pastor William Willimon, former chaplain at Duke University and a Methodist bishop, talks about this passage. He notes that the rich, young man, like us, is seeking the good life.

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The secret that Jesus holds out to us is that the good life is not found in what we call materialism or consumerism. **THE GOOD LIFE IS THE LIFE THAT IS GIVEN AWAY.** Willimom goes on that say that we must strive to make life simple again because: materialism and greed destroys us; you can't love both God and wealth; Christ doesn't come to make us prosperous, successful or happy; we love, but that love is shallow because we are too selfish; and, that God is not a priority for us.

If we are to find God, we are going to have to let go of greed. This applies to all people, regardless of their economic status. Jesus is not offering what I see as pop Christianity, or feel good faith. We want it all..but materialism and God. But that's not going to happen! Greed and love are at opposite ends of the pole. Giving money & possessions away are serious expressions of committed love! We are caught in the same trap as the rich, young man..self-interest versus God's interest. We falsely think our wealth & possessions will give us safety, security and happiness. All we do is become more anxious, obsessed with getting more and protecting what we've got.

I read an interesting article the other day about all these big lottery winners in our country. I was shocked to see that more than 75% of them end up in bankruptcy, divorce, lawsuits and more. So much for the promise of the lottery! Is that what we are trying so hard to copy? Why? This is not the way of Jesus!

Jesus carries on his conversation with the disciples. He talks about how stewardship, following him, begins first with us. As we think about Grace Church we acknowledge that the changes we make here will shape who we are tomorrow. That brings us to the topic of stewardship. The Vestry has been working with a five-year plan that looks to the future for Grace Church. A significant part of it depends upon our increasing our giving and stewardship.

We hear about how we struggle to make our budget. One of the things we have seen this year is that people make a pledge, but don't pay it. What do we think of others that make promises and don't keep them? Another reality we have to confront is too often we pledge the least we could. What does this say about what we believe? The national average for giving to the church of Episcopalians is 2.5%. It's the giving pattern of most Americans.. but our average is 1%! Why is it that we are not nearer to the average? If you are giving at least 2.5%..thank you! Then ask yourself, what does God want me to do next? Are you not at 2.5%? Make this your goal and start working towards it!

If we are to be Disciples of Christ, our actions must reflect our words. Our faith has to be lived out in our lives. If everyone in this parish gave 2.5% of their income, if we all took this as a means of being a disciple of Jesus Christ..we wouldn't have a budget problem! As a matter of fact, we would be so busy trying to figure out what we would do next! Our ministry in this place would be astounding!

Think about it..what are some of the things we could do if our stewardship increased here? Things would look very different! We could help Mt. Pisgah rebuild their church. We

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could help St. Andrew's in Camden build a parish house. We could pay our full Diocesan share. We could hire an associate. We might hire a youth minister. We could renovate the interior of our church building. We could make a difference in training and teaching others so they could live decent lives. We could feed the hungry, clothe the poor, and educate those in need. We could...well, you fill in the blank!

But what are we thinking? To do all this would mean a change of heart on our part. We're not ready to make that commitment. We're the rich, young man. Jesus was a nice man, but he doesn't understand that we have expenses. Doesn't Jesus know that we just can't do anymore? Or can we? Have we decided to follow Jesus, and the old hymn says, or are we just going to go away sad like the rich, young man? We do have a choice. What will be ours?