

**OUR STEWARDSHIP OF WEALTH**  
**October 11, 2009 Pentecost 19 Proper 23**  
**Grace Episcopal Church, Haddonfield, NJ Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close**

The Gospel of Mark presents us with the familiar story of the rich young man ... and the troubling call by Jesus to sell everything we have! It's a fascinating story that has meaning for us today. Jesus calls a person to follow him, to become his disciple and the man turns away. The reason was ... money! This is the only place where anyone has a direct face-to-face call to discipleship by Jesus and he turns away. The reason was ... money!

Ah yes, here we are ... challenged to talk about that thing we don't like to discuss ... money. We all think that we don't have enough of it. We all think the rich should be paying more (and they think they should be paying less). We have to pay bills, we are facing uncertain economic times ... and it all has to do with money. What's the problem?

Bill McKibben wrote an article for Harper's Magazine in July 2005, entitled, "The Christian Paradox." He had some interesting things to say about us. In the article, McKibben noted that only 40% of Americans could name 4 of the 10 commandments! Not too good, eh? He went on to say that only 50% of Americans could name the four authors of the Gospels. This is looking grim. He went on to say that 75% of us believe the bible teaches: "God helps those who help themselves." Sorry folks, this is not in the Bible, it's from our Philadelphian friend, Ben Franklin. McKibben notes towards the end of his article that there is an irony in our country. We are the most professedly Christian of the developed nations, and the least Christian in our behavior. Not very good news.

Why do I mention this? There seems to be a disconnect between what we say and what we do, both with our money and as Christians. Do you know that Jesus talks more about money and wealth than any other topic in the Bible? What's the reason for this? Perhaps it is because to the road to Christian discipleship, being a follower of Jesus, is strewn with obstacles ... and money is the biggest one. We are obsessed with our stuff, and it gets in the way of our living the Christian life. My old New Testament professor, Reggie Fuller, said that this passage of Mark is about our stewardship of wealth.

Groups of twenty of us from the parish are meeting on Tuesday nights to take Dave Ramsay's course on "financial peace." I came to the understanding that if we want to be better stewards at Grace Church, we have to take charge of our financial lives. Right now, we are in financial bondage. Our financial lives are out of control. Dave Ramsay says that 80% of us are living paycheck to paycheck. He goes on to say that 50% of us worry about money. That means there are 30% of us living in denial!

These recent economic downturns have made many of us think differently about how we look at money. The old thinking that we can buy our way out of problems at the mall has failed us. Too many of us never learned how to do a budget. I am shocked when I do pre-marital counseling and most couples have not sat down and devised a budget. We are in trouble, and this affects our spiritual lives too!

I liked one of the first things I learned from the class on Tuesday night. We must do two things with our money before we start paying bills. First, we must pay our tithe to the Church (that's 10% for those who don't know what the tithe is). Next, we must pay

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ourselves (another 10% would be a good goal!). Then we can pay our bills. We have gotten into bad habits that have resulted in bad stewardship that lead to bad discipleship. We have got to change, for our own good and for the good of the Church.

Let's take a closer look at the Gospel today and see what Jesus is saying to us. What's happening here, well, a rich young man has come to Jesus. Herb O'Driscoll says that his actions represent the human search for God. We are all looking for some answers. This young man is seeking an answer from Jesus. The Good News is that we find God in Jesus. Our journey towards the Kingdom of God takes us through the person of Jesus.

The young man has a specific question, he knows what he wants, "What do I have to do to obtain eternal life?" Jesus asks him a question, he cites the 10 Commandments that have to do with relationship with others (notice that he doesn't mention the ones that have to do with God, but more on that later). The young man says that he's kept this part of the Law. Notice Jesus' response, he loves this man! Jesus sees great potential in this young man. He stands on the very brink of the kingdom of God!

Then Jesus says, "You need just one more thing." Sounds innocent at first, eh? But here comes the challenge ... "Sell all you have, give the money to the poor, and come follow me." Whoa! That's a BIG demand! We're not surprised by the young man's response, he turns away ... sad ... he just can't do it. His wealth defines him, and he just can't let go of it.

The rich young man stood at the place where he could attain the greatest gift of all, eternal life, but he just couldn't let go of his things to attain it. Jesus offer him more than he could ever imagine, but he couldn't make the sacrifice that would have given him more than he could ever dream for ... aren't we in that same place?

The disciples are shocked at what they hear. They are even more shocked when Jesus says how hard it is for the rich to get in heaven. In Jesus' time, the disciples held the common view that God blessed the wealthy. Jesus was turning their world upside down, again. We can't buy our way into heaven. We don't earn our way into the Kingdom of God ... it's a gift ... but there are requirements.

What I think is happening here is that Jesus is testing the young man's relationship with God (the first four commandments). What he exposes is the obstacle that exists for the young man ... his love of his wealth that is more than his love for God. It's true, even today. We love our things more than we love God, and it's really, really hard to part with them.

I know, I know. We don't think we are rich. But we are ... want to know how rich we are? I came upon a web site recently, called the Global Rich List. You punch in your income and it tells you your ranking in the world. I punched in mine, and ended up in the top 1% of the people in the world! You know how well paid clergy are today! Whoa! For fun, I punched in \$50,000 ... that number was still in the top 1%. Amazing. We plead poverty all the time, yet by the world's standards, not ours, we are among the richest of the rich.

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What must we do to be a Christian? Jesus is challenging us today. Step one ... we have to live like a Christian. It's time to stop saying we are Christian when our actions don't match what we say. The next step is to give up the way of the world. Jesus is challenging us to stop thinking that wealth; power, control, status and possessions will gain us the Kingdom of God. They won't. If we want the gift of life, we have to follow Jesus!

Jesus is calling us to be the 13<sup>th</sup> disciple. What's getting in our way? What's the challenge, or the obstacle that keeps us from living into the fullness of being a disciple?

The rich young man came, expectant, sincere and well intentioned, just like us. We both are searching for God. But he left sad. Will we leave too? Remember that Jesus loved him, and that he loves us too. But the young man just couldn't take the next step. Can we take the next step? Jesus sees the same potential in us that he saw in the young man. We too stand on the cusp of the Kingdom ... are we willing to take the next step? God promises us eternal life, but there is a cost for us ... we have to give up some things, some old ways of doing things, to embrace something even greater than this world.

It seems timely that this reading comes as we are undertaking our stewardship campaign. We are each being asked to make a commitment to Grace Church as part of our being a Christian disciple. Frankly, we've not been doing too well on our stewardship. We don't like to talk about money, but the challenges are still in front of us ... they aren't going away.

Too often the check we write to the Church is the last one, not the first. Our Church and ministries suffer because of our bad habits. Many of the things we have come to expect won't be here next year. It's time for us to stop saying, or thinking, that it's someone else's responsibility. It's ours. It starts with us. I am a tither in my life, and I challenge you to do the same. I write the first check to the Church, and then pay the rest of the bills. Let's start living a responsible Christian life. You and what you will give will determine the shape of this Church's life.

Our stewardship of wealth challenges us to consider what is valuable in life. Most of the things that really matter can't be bought with money. Do we like this beautiful fall day? It's a gift from God, we can't buy it. There are so many other things that can't be bought: a child's laughter; a lover's embrace; a friend's encouragement; even life itself. Jesus is calling us to follow him. He loves us. He sees the potential in us. He has a great gift of life to offer us. All Jesus asks is to give up the world and to follow him ... he's asking for a commitment. The question is, what's getting in our way, and what are we going to do about it?