

Money

Just a few weeks ago, we made the switch with Saint Mark, from stories told in haste to a sort of slowing down as Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem and the inevitable confrontation with the powers that be; the inevitable suffering; and the entirely unexpected resurrection from the dead.

It is now, on the way, that Jesus spends so much time explaining, by word and example, how we might become disciples, how we too might enter the kingdom of heaven, not just at death, but even now in the midst of this life.

And so he puts the last first, he points to insignificant children as role models and today he takes on probably the toughest obstacle we each of us face to becoming real disciples: the problem of money.

I don't know....

Do you see money as a problem on your journey of discipleship?

Does money get in the way of you following Jesus, not simply admiring him?

Well, our Bishop has decided that starting next week, in order to be a member in good standing in the Episcopal church, each member must disclose publicly what their actual income is, what their assets are, and how much each member pledges.

This information is to be written on large pieces of newsprint and posted in the narthex of every church.

Does that work for everyone?

Not to worry, I'm lying; but I made it up to make a point.

When it comes to money, the common thread in our culture is that what I have is no one's business; what I give is up to me; and what I have earned is mine to do with as I see fit.

The problem is, Jesus completely rejects our common idea about money.

More than any other subject, Jesus talks about money.

One in three parables is about money; nearly 20% of everything else Jesus talks about refers to money.

It's not surprising.

Money then and money now is what we look to for security, for consolation, for comfort and for well-being.

And here comes Jesus to say that our love of money, our attachment to money, our accumulation of money, make it nearly impossible for we who are rich to enter the kingdom of God.

Make no mistake; we are rich.

All of us.

From the lawyers and businessmen and developers among us even to our newest arriving friend from Chuuk: compared to our brothers and sisters in the world; nearly a billion of whom are chronically hungry, more than a billion of whom live on less than a dollar a day: we are the rich.

And as the rich, we and those rich who have come before us, try to water down this hard saying of Jesus.

"It's not money that's the problem; it's our attitude about money!," some say

Another popular watering down says that Jesus isn't talking about a camel and a sewing needle: he's talking about an entry gate at the Temple called "the eye of the needle."

It's low, so a camel has to release its load and get on its knees to crawl through.

Nice story, but that's probably not what Jesus means.

The reason Jesus' disciples stand there with their jaws hanging open is that they hear quite clearly what Jesus is saying – money is the problem -- and while camels might make their way through a needle's eye, the result is going to be messy.

C.S. Lewis put it this way:

"All things (such as a camel's journey through a needle's eye) are possible, it's true; But picture how the camel feels, squeezed out, in one long, bloody thread from tail to snout."

Mark Twain has it right when he says: "It's not the parts of the Bible that I don't understand that trouble me; it's the parts that I do understand!"

Jesus is God's claim on us; and God is determined to have all of us; not only in the next life, but here, now, today.

So here we stand, side by side with the young man who, like us, attends church, does his best to be fair and honorable, and is truly concerned to follow, as best he can, the will of God.

Here we stand with him: eye-to-eye with Jesus.

I wonder what his life would have been like if he said “yes” to the offer of Jesus.

Would he have replaced Judas as the twelfth apostle?

Might he have been in that upper room when the resurrected Lord walked through walls, eating and drinking with them?

Was he supposed to be with them on the beach as the Risen Lord cooked that charcoal breakfast for them?

Perhaps he was meant to accompany Thomas and evangelize all the way to India; or join Paul on his journeys throughout the Roman Empire.

I wonder what his life might have been like had that young man said “yes,” instead of hanging his head and walking away, trading in the adventure of discipleship to remain a mere possession of all of his possessions.

And what might our lives be like if we too might summon the courage to say “yes” to this strange Lord, who tells us to amputate any hindrance, to lower our gaze, to forgive long after the cows have come home, to trust that the God who is resourceful enough to create the cosmos is also thoughtful enough to know our needs and to provide for them.

“The story is told that Clarence Jordan, that great Southern, social prophet, visited an integrated church in the Deep South.

Jordan was surprised to find a large church so thoroughly integrated, not only black and white but also rich and poor; and this was in the early sixties, too.

Jordan asked the old country preacher, "How did you get the church this way?"

"What way?" the preacher asked.

Jordan went on to explain his surprise at finding a church so integrated, and in the South, too.

The preacher said, "Well, when our preacher left our small church, I went to the deacons and said, 'I'll be the preacher.'

The first Sunday as preacher, I opened the book and read,

'For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus.

And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes.

There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female.

For you are all one in Christ Jesus.'

Then I closed the book and I said, 'If you are one with Jesus, you are one with all kinds of folks.

And if you're not, well, you're not.'"

Jordan asked what happened after that.

"Well," the preacher said, "the deacons took me into the back room and they told me they didn't want to hear that kind of preaching any more."

Jordan asked what he did then.

"I fired those deacons," the preacher roared.

"Then what happened?" asked Jordan.

"Well," said the old hillbilly preacher, "I preached that church all the way down to just four members.

Not long after that, it started growing.

And it grew.

And I learned that preaching the gospel doesn't always mean bringing people in; sometimes it means getting people out who are too afraid to love Jesus." (As told in Hauerwas and Willimon, *Where Resident Aliens Live*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1996, p. 103).

Perhaps the same is true when it comes to our relationship, and I use that word quite intentionally -- when it comes to our relationship with money.

Jesus calls us to look that relationship in the eye and to ask, without blinking, how does my love affair with money match up with my love affair with God; and perhaps more concretely, how does my use of money give witness to my unity with everyone in this place?

The letter to the Hebrews isn't joking:

"The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it judges the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

And before him ... all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account."

As we know, giving an account includes explaining how we have used our money.

Perhaps, like that southern preacher, we too need to preach ourselves down to a point where we can once again hear the promise of the gospel, and in hearing it, follow -- wherever it decides to take us.

Here is one way to get there.

It's a way suggested by a fellow named Jacque Ellul, a wonderful theologian and a faithful Christian, who answers the question:

"How do you overcome the spiritual power of money?"

"Not by accumulating more money, not by using money for good purposes, not by being just and fair in our dealings.

The law of money **is** the law of accumulation, of buying and selling.

That is why the only way to overcome the spiritual power of money is to **give our money away**, thus, making it no longer sacred, and freeing ourselves from its control...."

Or, to put it more simply,

"Money is like manure, it's not worth a thing unless it's spread around."

The young man rushes up to Jesus and asks: "How do I inherit eternal life?"

And Jesus replies: "Follow me."

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