

A man always had a fear of having someone under his bed at night. So he went to a psychiatrist and told him, "I've got a problem. Every time I go to bed I think there's somebody under it. I'm scared. I think I might be going crazy." "Just put yourself in my care for 1 year," said the doctor. "Come see me 3 times a week and we should be able to rid you of those fears." "How much do you charge?" "\$80 per visit," replied the Doctor. "I'll sleep on it," replied the man.

6 months later the Doctor saw the man on the street and asked "Why didn't you come to see me about those fears you were having?" "Well, "\$80 a visit, 3 times a week for a year, is \$12,480. A bartender cured me for \$10. I was so happy I saved all that money that I bought myself a new pickup truck."

With a bit of attitude, the doctor said, "Is that so? And how, may I ask, did a bartender cure you?" "He told me to cut the legs off the bed. Ain't nobody getting under there now." Always remember to get a second opinion!

OK, first some background on the gospel text. We are told at the beginning of the text that the encounter of Jesus and the man was "As Jesus was setting out on a journey." The journey is to Jerusalem and the cross. So any demand that Jesus places on this man needs to be seen in the context of the severe sacrifice that Jesus is about to make on His cross.

This is also the only time in Mark's Gospel that Jesus makes so sweeping a command in regard to wealth. He has called His disciples to sacrifice all in 8:34-37 and 10:28-31, but this Gospel is noteworthy for its demands. We remember that we heard in the parable of the sower (Mark 4:19) that possessions can choke the word of God and keep it from taking root.

In the only instance in which Jesus is said to have loved an individual, Jesus looks at this man in love (v. 21). Jesus in no way implies that the man is insincere, nor does He criticize the man for being self-righteous. Jesus 'loved him.' The rich man is not the only one who is shocked by Jesus' pronouncement (v. 22, 26). Jesus' command that he give up his riches is even more shocking because wealth was considered a sign of divine blessing in that day – and in our day too.

Jesus is primarily inviting this man to be a disciple, not calling him to a life of poverty. Note the decisive words COME and FOLLOW in 10:21. While this is a call to discipleship story, it is also a criticism of wealth story. Wealth is a major factor that separates the rich from the poor, but Jesus presents wealth to this man as a means of connection with the poor. He is instructed to give his money to the poor. But this is too high a price for the man to pay, he refuses and walks away.

One final little detail may be significant. The man is said to kneel before Jesus (v. 17). In Mark, every time someone kneels before Jesus, it is to ask Jesus for healing. Which makes us ask the question of whether Mark is saying that the rich person, for all his riches, is not well and needs healing (salvation = healing)? Even as Jesus heals people from blindness and other afflictions, He offers to heal this man of his riches. This is a tough text and requires some prayerful reflection to deal with it. (adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, Oct-Dec 2018, p. 6-7)

Second, what I hope we are doing here together in the homilies is some theological exploration and reflection – the 'why does this matter to me' question. Even as children, we are budding theologians – as we deal with the death of a pet or parent or friend, the deferral or denial of things we longed for, or when we hope that our parents would get back together after a divorce. As we grow and mature, these reflections

should mature as well –we deal with the questions of evil and injustice, happiness and suffering, what we do with our leisure-work balance, and how we make and spend money. Life puts before us questions about nature and hurricanes, what is good and true and beautiful, good and evil, death and hope, community, unconditional love, forgiveness and joy. All of these things challenge us. What do they mean? How should we deal with them? What – or who helps to guide us through this wondrous maze we call human life? We may not often think of it in these terms, but our pondering about life, about what really matters, is called theology. Jesus didn't argue with his listeners, but He offered them stories that challenged them not only to think differently – but to choose differently. What is Jesus challenging us to deal with in this text? It's an issue we mostly avoid talking about in our culture -- money. But 13 of Jesus' 18 major parables focus on money, and Jesus talks about money more than any other subject. So He knew how easily money could ensnare the human heart. Jesus didn't exactly say, "Pick up your cash and follow me," but that's a safe paraphrase of His call to the rich young man in today's gospel, and presumably Matthew and Zacchaeus.

When I was in Chapel Hill there was a guy who came to church to pray every day. He approached me one day and asked, 'Father, is it ok to ask God to give me the lottery number? I promised God I would give half my winning to the church.' I was tempted to join him in his prayer. But I know the spirit of greed in my own soul, so I said, 'Tell you what, how about you give half of what you have *now* – and then maybe the Lord will *give* you the lottery number.' (adapted from THE PATH TO FORGIVENESS, Paul Boudreau, Lent, 2009, p. 39)

Researchers tell us that as Christians today we would sooner tell one another what we do in our bedrooms than tell one another what we make. Which is but an indication of what we really care about. Jesuit theologian John Haughey says that "we read the gospel as if we had no money, and we spend our money as if we know nothing about the gospel." Yet no aspect of our lives is more determinative of the welfare of our soul. At its root, the gospel teaches about the grace of receiving that which the Creator gives, the responsibility not to take too much, nor to mistake the gift as our own possession. The world as God created it, is abundant. There is enough for everyone, provided that we all restrain our appetites and live within reason. Disparities in wealth and power are not 'natural,' but the result of human sin, and the church teaches that this must be mitigated through the regular practice of redistribution. And such redistribution is thus characterized as 'good news' to the poor. What does it say about our understanding of the gospel when we get a tax cut and all we think of is how much more I can afford to buy – when there was a time when taxes were adjusted so that those with a lot paid more so that those with little could have more. (adapted from THE LIVING PULPIT, Willimon, April-June 2003, p. 14) In the end, the gospel question really boils down to this: Would we rather save our money or save our lives?

I have to tell you that it is disheartening that we are riding very nice economic times and our collection is flat, we have more than 200 more families this year than last and our income has not increased. Only half of our 3100 families contribute regularly, and almost half contribute nothing. Not a single dime. And don't tell me that you give cash. Because then there are over 1500 families claiming about \$3000 on a weekend – so you can claim less than \$2.00. Is this really a gospel response to a God who has given us our very life? What does it say about our values? But even more importantly, our relationship with God? This is a big spiritual issue. And until we address it, and begin to work toward tithing, our hearts will remain hardened by a love of money. A tithe of 10% tells us – and God – that AT LEAST 10% of our heart belongs to God. If we don't tithe, it's just about me. We should prayerfully consider how much we are giving, and then resolve to increase it 1 or 2% until we reach the 10% amount.

Third, as I said this text IS about money and it's about MORE than money. It asks the question of all of us: "What is it that I'm holding on to too tightly that I need to let go so that God is most important in my life?"

A couple came before Jesus: "Good teacher, we have raised 2 beautiful children. We cared for them, taught them and loved them through all the twists and turns of childhood. We got them through college and they are now on their own. What must we do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus looked at the couple and loved them. He said, "Go, use your new freedom to help other families struggling with all the issues you struggled with. Be a source of wisdom, guidance, and financial help for them as they raise their families. Then come, follow me." And the couple's faces fell, because their flight to the Bahamas was beginning to board.

The CEO of a company came before Jesus: "Good teacher, my company employs hundreds of people. We conduct our business honestly and ethically. We meticulously keep every employment, safety and environmental regulation – even though it costs us a lot of money. What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus looked at the CEO and loved him. He said: "Go, redirect the greater share of your profits to providing for your employees. Take the lead in the responsible care of the environment by businesses like yours. Make your company a model of ethical advertising and consumer protection. Then come, follow me." And the CEO's face fell, because he knew this would never fly with his board.

A politician came before Jesus: "Good teacher, I serve my district 24-7. I listen to the voters and act in their best interests. I've been a dependable and consistent vote for policies and programs that will guarantee the future of our city and state. What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus looked at the politician and loved him. He said, "Go, support an initiative that will be unpopular with your voters, that may cost you your office, but will benefit the poor, the powerless, the vulnerable, the illegal. Then come, follow me." And the politician's face fell, because it was an election year.

A teenager came before Jesus: "Good teacher, I study hard in school. I get good grades. I have a part-time job after school. I'm on the basketball team and play in the band. I try to be a good daughter and sister. I'm working hard to get into a good college. What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus looked at the teen and loved her. "Go, befriend the student in your school who is alone. Give your mom and dad a break by taking on some responsibility around the house. Spend less time on your devices and give time to BROWN BAG MINISTRY or HABITAT FOR HUMANITY or any service agency. Then come, follow me." And the teenager's face fell, because her schedule was full.

All of us know how the rich young man feels in today's Gospel. Yes, Jesus asks everything of us as the cost of being His disciple – but Jesus asks of us only what we have, not what we don't have. Each one of us possesses talents and resources, skills and assets that we have been given by God for the work of making the kingdom of God a reality here and now. Authentic discipleship demands more than token contributions and coming to Mass on Sundays. Our baptism into the life of Christ compels us to focus our lives on the things of God. To be the disciple of Christ we seek to become means a reordering of our priorities, a restructuring of our days to make time for the things of God. May we live a life of gratitude -- returning to God the gifts He has given us -- so that we may embrace eternity in the age to come. Amen. (adapted from CONNECTIONS, October 2018, p. 2)