

Proper 24A (Pentecost 20), 2009

Text: Mark 10:17-31

Title: "Love Gives Everything"

+ INI +

What do you think about rich people? What do you think about those people who have money to burn, more than they could ever need, who are set for life, who live in fancy houses and drive fancy cars and never had to work a day in their life?

Chances are you don't have a very high opinion of the rich. Especially those who inherited their money rather than working for it. We often think of the rich as lazy or wasteful. If only we had that kind of money, we would spend it much more wisely.

We like to think of ourselves as Robin Hoods who would take from the rich and give to the poor, because, God knows, the rich don't deserve their wealth. It should belong to honest, hard-working folks like you and me.

We like to think that, since the rich have it so easy in this life, that hopefully they'll have a hard time in the next, that somehow things will eventually even out.

It makes us feel good when we hear Jesus' words to the rich in today's gospel lesson, when Jesus tells the man to sell everything and give it to the poor. It makes us feel good to hear Jesus say that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter heaven, because those words are for somebody else and not for us. "Yeah, you tell 'em Jesus."

But before you get too excited, take a look at yourself. Consider how rich you really are.

Even if you're not wealthy by American standards, in most other countries you would be considered rich. Most of you own your own home, or can afford a nice place to rent. Most of you have a car and a TV and cell phone and computer. You have multiple sets of clothing. You have cupboards and refrigerators full of food. You have money in the bank.

You are rich. You have many possessions. You have more than you need to get by. You have more than just the bare minimum. You're not living day to day, worrying where your next meal is coming from.

Now that's not the case for all of you. Some of you have had difficult times where you've struggled to make ends meet, where you've gone hungry and worried about providing for your family. Yet consider all that you've received, all the blessings that you've been given that have gotten you through the tough times.

Being rich is not necessarily a bad thing, but it makes things quite difficult with your relationship to God.

You see, when you're rich, you are self-sufficient. You can take care of yourself. And when you can take care of yourself, there's no need for God. When you rely on yourself and your own resources, what do you need God for? When you can provide your own daily bread, why pray for it?

This is why it is so hard for rich folks to enter heaven. They don't think they need God. They're doing just fine without Him.

Look at religious life around the globe. Where is the church dying and where is it thriving? Christianity is dying in rich countries like the United States, Canada, and Western Europe, while it is thriving and growing in Africa and Asia, where people have less and need God more.

It's difficult for rich folks to enter heaven. We love our possessions so much that they get in our way. We like our stuff, and it's hard for us to give it up.

The rich man in today's story had no problem obeying God, He had no problem with the Ten Commandments. He could handle being a law-abiding citizen, not killing or stealing or committing adultery. "Yes, of course Jesus, I've been a good boy," says the man. He's kept the letter of the law. But when it came to sacrificing his possessions, sell all that he had and giving it to the poor, that was asking too much.

So what would you do if God called you to give up everything for the poor? Could you do it? Let's start small. Could you give up the luxuries of life? Could you give up cable TV? Could you give up your cell phone? Could you give up the internet? Could you give up eating out? Could you give up going to the game? Could you give up going on vacation? Or are you so attached to these things that you'd have a hard time living without them.

Most of us would have a hard time being Christians if it meant changing our lifestyle. We're happy to follow Jesus as long as we can fit Him into our lives and we don't have to make any radical changes. We can stand giving up an hour or two of sleep on Sunday morning, as long as there's nothing else going on, and put a couple of bucks in the plate, money that we can afford and won't miss, but for many of us that's as far as it goes.

Following Jesus means no longer living for yourself. It means putting others and their needs in front of yours. It means trusting in God to care for you.

How can we do such a thing? How can we be willing to give up everything and follow Jesus? It seems impossible.

And it is. Jesus says that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Or, in case you haven't been around any camels recently, try this: it's easier for a semi to drive through a garden hose than for a rich person to be saved.

The point is that it's impossible. It's impossible for us. There's no way, on our own, for us to loosen our death-grip on our possessions and trust in God to take care of us. Only with God is this possible.

It's possible with God, because God has already done it himself.

God gave everything. God gave His first and His best. "God did not spare His only Son, and freely gave Him up for us all."

How could God do that? How could God give up His Son for you? It seems impossible. The answer is love. "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."

There's no way that we can understand such love. We don't deserve God's love. We can't earn God's love. We're not very lovable people. We're sinful, selfish people. We care more about ourselves than other people. But God still loves you. He gave up everything, even His own Son for you.

Jesus loves you. Jesus had everything. He was creator and ruler of heaven and earth, and He shared in the very divinity of God. And yet Jesus gave everything up for you. He came to earth and was born as a mortal man for you. He took your sin upon Himself, and He died in your place. Jesus gave everything for you.

Jesus did this out of love for you. It's beyond our ability to understand or comprehend how Jesus could do this, how He could love us so much. "God demonstrated His love to us in this, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Jesus died for you. He gave His very life for you because He loved you.

Love gives. It's just what love does. Love caused God to give His Son for you. Love caused Jesus to give His life for you.

You are loved by God, and God's love changes you. God's love comes first, but once you've been loved, you are changed. "We love because He first loved us." God's love makes you loving people. God's love makes you giving people. Loving and giving go hand in hand.

Peter is exhibit A. He was a fisherman. He had a wife and a family. He was a small business owner with a thriving business. But when Jesus said, "Follow me." Peter was loved by Jesus. Jesus sought Peter out and called him. Peter was changed. He left his home, his business and his wife to follow Jesus. He gave them all up to follow Jesus.

I've been privileged to witness many examples of Christian giving, as people give generously of their time and their money, to those in need. I've seen many examples right here in this congregation of people giving generously.

Sometimes people give money. Sometimes people give other things. This piano sitting in front of you was a generous donation, given without the expectation of anything in return.

Sometimes people donate their time and their skills, the gifts God has given them in service to this congregation and to those in need. When I see you here volunteering your time working

when you could easily be relaxing or doing you own thing, I know that God's love is at work among us.

All this generosity is evidence of God's love at work among us. It's not something that we can take credit for, but it's all because of God's love. His love for us makes us loving, giving people.

Jesus calls us to leave ourselves behind and live for others. Some, like the man in today's gospel, will reject this call and go away sad. Others, like Peter and the apostles, will obey the call and leave everything behind to follow Jesus.

Jesus concludes our gospel by promising that we will receive a reward both here and in the age to come. Again, this is nothing we can take credit for. As Jesus says, with man this is impossible, but with God, all things are possible.

Through God's grace, we respond to Jesus' call and no longer live for ourselves. And there are benefits to following Jesus. Jesus talks about a new family- brothers and sisters and mothers and children. Look around you. The folks in these pews are your brothers and sisters and mothers and children. In Christ we are a new family, and one of the joys of following Him is the new people in our lives. You also have a new home, the church, where your heavenly Father cares for you.

Those are gifts you receive here and now. And in the age to come you will have eternal life. Jesus says that you will have treasure in heaven.

You are rich. All of you. You have Jesus Christ, the greatest treasure you could imagine. Jesus is yours, along with all the joys of heaven. When you compare this heavenly treasure to all your earthly possessions, there's no comparison. What Jesus gives is more valuable, more precious than anything on earth. He gives you Himself.

This Divine Service is where Jesus gives you His gifts. This is where Jesus makes you rich. This is where He gives you His love and forgiveness. This is where He gives you His Holy Spirit. This is where He gives you His words of life. This is where He gives you His body and blood. You may enter this place as poor and needy, but you leave overflowing with God's riches.

You are rich.