Nu'uanu Congregational Church

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

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THE MAN WHO HAD TOO MUCH Mark 10:17–31

May God’s grace and peace be with us this day! Let us pray:

May the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, o God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The parable we just heard, which is also found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, has often been called the parable of the “rich young ruler.” This title results from the fact that in Matthew the man is identified as a “young” man, and in Luke, he is identified as a “ruler.” However, in the gospel of Mark, he is just a “man.” That is why I have given this sermon the title “The Man Who Had Too Much.” We do not find out that the man was rich until the end of the story *after* he turns away from the call to discipleship. In the beginning he is just a “man” who comes to Jesus with a question: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” I like the idea that the man is just a man. Most of us listening to this are probably not young nor a ruler, but some of us may have too many possessions. And so, because the fellow who asks the question is just a man, it makes it us easier for us to identify with him. We become more easily involved in the story.

Let’s return to the man’s initial question. “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus challenges the address “Good Teacher.” Sensing that the man may have a false motive for complimenting him by calling him “good,” Jesus answers him: “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” What a revealing response this is. Conventional Christianity all too often reduces the demands of the Gospel by emphasizing the need to be good. However, being good is often dictated by cultural norms. I am reminded of the fellow who once received a “layman of the year award” all because he did not smoke or drink. He, however, was the worst racist in his town, so much for being good. The theologian Douglas Hall reminds us that we should not regard Christianity as a “system of morality.” For one thing, Christians are not the only human beings who are asked to live a moral life. For another thing, no one can claim to truly live a moral life. All of us fall short. Only God can be called good.

At any rate, Jesus then recites many of the Ten Commandments to the man, implying that the man, a Jew, already knows them. But Ched Myers in his brilliant commentary on the parable contained in his book *“Binding the Strong Man”* points out that Jesus includes a commandment not found in the Ten Commandments, and the commandment is this: “You shall not defraud.”

We are beginning to anticipate that something may be revealed about this man that we do not yet know. In 1st century Palestine, wealth was rarely achieved without economic exploitation. Ched Myers also points out that the commandment “You shall not defraud” is omitted in the version of the parable found in Matthew and Luke. Ched Myers says that that more is at stake than the personal failure of this one man. Judgment is being passed upon the wealthy class of Jesus’s day.

The man seems to disregard Jesus’s insistence that no one can be called good, because he then says that he has observed *all* the commandments from his youth. He claims to be blameless before the law. But the Talmud declares that only Abraham, Moses, and Aaron have kept the whole law.

Jesus looks upon the man and our story says that “Jesus loved him.” This is the only place in the entire Gospel that Jesus is described as loving someone. We wonder why this is so. It may be that Mark is driving home the point that Jesus is simply following the great commandment to love God and our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus is simply practicing what he preaches. He loves this man as he would love himself.

Even as the man declares that he has kept the whole law, Jesus then says that he lacks one thing. He must get up and sell what he has and give it to the poor and then follow Jesus. It is only at this point that we learn that the man could not do this because he had many possessions. Ched Myers points out that a more precise translation of the Greek might read: “because he had much property.” It is one thing to have one house and one field. But it is quite another to have much property. In other words, the man is a wealthy landowner. Wealthy landowners in 1st century Palestine did not become wealthy without exploiting the poor. In truth, our man lied to Jesus when he declared that he had kept the whole law. He surely at one time or another must have defrauded others. At any rate, the man cannot bring himself to do what Jesus requests. He just slinks away.

Jesus then tells his disciples that it is going to be hard indeed for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God.

The disciples are perplexed, as are we. But Jesus will not let the wealthy get a pass. He says that it will be harder for the rich to enter the kingdom of God than it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle! Who, then, can be saved? Jesus replies:

“For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

What can we say about following Jesus in our time and place? Yes, our economic system is different from the way 1st century Palestine was organized economically. But the reality of wealth remains the same. There are many in our society that simply have too much. Of course, we are not saying that the rich cannot enter the kingdom of God. With God, all things are possible. But it’s going to be hard for the rich to do so. One thing will be required. It comes down to two words: *Do justice.*

One thing we can say for sure. In light of Jesus’s teaching on wealth, the wealthy in our society need to be taxed much, much more than they currently are, and the proceeds of those taxes need to be directed to the needs of the poor. I like some recent postings of the Hawai`i Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice. One posting says: “If we tax billionaires too much they won’t be able to buy the essentials they need, like NFL franchises, islands, and tax deductible think tanks founded exclusively to legitimize fringe beliefs about how billionaires shouldn’t have to pay taxes.” Another posting declares: “If we tax the rich….they’ll still be rich.”

Beyond the need for a more just taxation of the rich, there will be the question of how the rich will do justice on behalf of the poor of our society. Some of those who are rich actually do use their wealth to benefit the poor. Thanks be to God. But many do very little.

And what of us? We are likely not billionaires. And it’s true. What it means to have enough in our society may be quite different than what it meant in Jesus’s day. But the truth remains: enough is all we need. Those of us who have more than we need are not excluded from the commandment to “do justice.” Our Christian faith asks us to take an honest look at our own economic circumstances and act accordingly. Believe me, this preacher is included. Today, I am preaching to myself as much as to you. That’s probably always the case.

The Gospel that we profess is a demanding gospel. Its implications go beyond the arena of the private and personal. It also speaks to the larger world of social relationships and economic justice and political realities. Let’s never make the Gospel too small or too convenient.

Let’s remember— with God all things are possible. With that in mind, let us focus on what God can do in our lives and then, by the grace and mercy of God, live as steadfast followers of Jesus who never ceases to call us to faithful discipleship. May it be so. Amen.