

You Lack One Thing

October 15, 2006

(Pentecost 19 - Year B)

Mark 10: 17-31

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

In the Gospel reading today, a man runs up in a hurry to Jesus on the road,

The man asks Jesus:

“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

And after the man lists all the ways in which he obeys the commandments,

Jesus looks at him and loves him and says:

“You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

When the man hears this, he is shocked and goes away grieving, for he had many possessions.

The cycle of Scripture readings that we use each Sunday follows a three year cycle.

Which means that we heard this reading from the Gospel of Mark in our churches 3 years ago, and also 6 years ago, on Sunday, October 15, 2000.

I had heard this story, commonly known as the story of the rich young ruler, for many years in church.

Every time I heard this story read, usually from the center aisle of my home parish, like we heard it today, I would listen intently to the description of the man in the story.

The young man was a good man, who honored his father and mother, obeyed most of the commandments and had a heart for love and charity.

But also, the young man was looking to complete his quest for holy living through acquisition, like finishing the rows in a game of Sudoku.

As I would hear this story read aloud, I would think:

“That man sounds an awful lot like me.”

Then, would come the zinger:

“You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

As I listened to this line, a physical pang would spread across my body,
beginning with my heart;

A feeling of gripping fear and dread,

And I would say to God:

“God, I love you.

You know I love you.

But, please, please, don't ever ask me to do that.”

But, in my heart, I always knew that he would.

So, back to 6 years ago.

In October of 2000, I knew that God was calling me to be a priest, but I
could not give up control and let God take over.

At that time, I was leading a small group Bible Study where we studied
the Scripture readings for the coming Sunday.

So, in my corner office at my company, I began to prepare for the Bible
study.

I pulled the scripture readings up on to my computer screen for the
coming Sunday:

Sunday, October 15, 2000.

And, there it was:

The story of the rich young ruler.

I felt that familiar piercing of my heart and I felt the fear.

And when I got to the line that said:

“You lack one thing; go, sell what you own.”

I began to weep and I dropped my head onto my computer keyboard.

Jesus was calling me to come and follow him.

So, after that October moment, I resigned from my position on the Board

of Directors of Hand Benefits & Trust,
Received my last paycheck as the Chief Financial Officer,
Pulled our children out of award-winning schools,
Had a garage sale,
Put our house on the market,
And packed up for the Virginia Theological Seminary.

What is that one thing that we lack?
For me, it was and is to let go of the control over my things and my
money.

Now, I have heard some theories about this story of the rich young ruler.
Some folks say that we each have “one thing” that we lack, and Jesus
looks into our hearts and knows that we all have *different* things
that we lack, whether it is that we lack compassion or that we lack
good moral values or that we lack the willpower to say no to
desserts.

But, those theories are just a cop out.

I have also heard some theories that attempt to explain what Jesus really
meant when he said:

“It is hard to enter the kingdom of God.

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for
someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

These theories are about how the eye of the needle was really a very
small gate in Jerusalem that camels had to kneel down to get
through.

But, those theories are just a cop out.

My friends, the one thing that we lack is just what Jesus said it is:

“Go, sell what you own, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure
in heaven; then, come and follow me.”

The one thing that we lack is that we have too much.

What must I do to inherit eternal life?

Get rid of your money and your stuff, plain and simple.

Did you know that this story, the story of the rich young ruler, is the only story in the Bible where someone refused to follow Jesus? To me, this shows that the greatest obstacle to us in following Jesus is not a lack of faith, not a lack of morality, not a lack of good deeds. The greatest obstacle for us in following Jesus is that we are unwilling to give up our money and our stuff.

We have many opportunities to get rid of our stuff and to give our money to those who are less fortunate. And specifically, in our Sunday morning liturgy, we are given the opportunity each week to put our obstacles, along with our bread and wine, on the altar.

Now, I am going to take a risk here and ask you to try out this Gospel message today. Many of you put your pledged offering in the offering plate each week, which is great. But, today, I also want you to put some cash into the offering plate.

Think for a moment about the amount of cash in your wallet or in your purse (which might be nothing), then think about how much cash you are going to put in the offering plate.

Does everyone have that figure in their head?

Ok, now.

Double that figure.

Let's live on the edge here.

Because that's just where Jesus wants us - on the edge, struggling with that one thing that we lack.

And, no, the Vestry did not ask me to do this because of some financial need in the church.

That is not the point.

The point is *not* what St. Alban's needs.

The point is that you need to get that cash out of your pocket.

The point is to get us coming to this altar rail with a lot less in our pockets than we had when we entered this church today.

The point is that we lack *one thing*: we have too much.

I want each of us to know what it feels like to give foolishly and without regard to the cost.

I want each of us to know what it feels like to say “yes” to Jesus.

I want each of us to know what eternal life feels like.

“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Even though Jesus’ answer might strike us with fear and dread,

Jesus looks at us and loves us and says:

“You lack *one thing*;

Go, sell what you own and give the money to the poor,

And you will have treasure in heaven.”

AMEN.

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