

Thomas R. Cook  
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota  
9:00 and 11:15 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist  
The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost; October 14, 2018

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## “Too Hard”

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Scripture: Mark 10:17-31

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It's a big day. He straightens up his robes and polishes the dust off his sandals. He pushes down his hair and rubs his teeth clean, flashes a confident grin, and ... he's ready. He's got his proverbial house in order. His investments are sound, his 401K is maxed out for the year, his portfolio brings in enough to keep him in comfortable conditions for the rest of his life and probably somebody else's too. The camels are corralled, the sheep are pastured, the produce is harvested and gone to market, and the small army of household servants has handled most everything. There remains but one final thing to do, one final possession to acquire. And for that, he needs Jesus.

You know what I have always wondered about this well-to-do man for whom it seems everything is going his way? Why didn't he have the sense to quit when he was ahead? He asks Jesus what he must do to inherit that one final feather in his cap, that last illusive jewel in his crown. I've got it all in the here and now, but "Jesus, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And you know what? He gets an answer ---a straight answer, a textbook answer--- from Jesus. *Follow the commandments: Don't murder,*

*don't cheat on your spouse, don't steal, don't lie, don't defraud others, be good to your parents. Do what you know is right.* But for some reason, that isn't enough for this man. Perhaps he feels that Jesus should have deduced from his appearance, his stature, his obvious quality of character, his aura as a man of great means, that things so ordinary as the commandments are already under his control. *Teacher*, he says, *I have kept all these since I was a little boy.* I'm telling you, he should have quit while he was ahead, because he was in no way ready for what comes next...

*Then let it go*, says Jesus. *All of it. Your wealth, your possessions. Sell it all, then give the money to those who don't have enough. Release your stature and your status. It's just getting in your way.*

You know, there are many stories in the Scriptures that would seem to honor wealth, stories of gifts of wealth, and earnings of wealth, of wealth dubiously acquired, of wealth generously shared. It's fair to assume that those who left us these stories understand that wealth is an ordinary part of the human condition. But I can think of no stories that Jesus tells when wealth is the means of salvation for the wealthy one, except, perhaps, this story... when Jesus tells a well-to-do man he will find his salvation in giving away what he has. He buys nothing with his wealth, you understand. This is no purchase of which Jesus speaks. Rather this is a relinquishing, a surrender, an unburdening, so that this man might be so unencumbered as to

squeeze through the needle's eye with God's help into the one true inheritance he so deeply desires. And yet he finds his burden too heavy, and the inheritance he seeks from Jesus too costly. So he walks away grieving. Today is not his day after all. Today belongs to his riches... and so does he.

Hard, Jesus says... very hard ---but not impossible--- for those with much to find a way into the Kingdom of God. But it seems clear that the way is bounded by stewardship, by the right use of wealth for the sake of the good of others. Our spirits gain nothing by the hoarding of our means, and the peace we might desire in our spirits cannot ultimately be bought and owned. Frederick Buechner once said that:

“...the trouble with [having much] is that since you can [try to] solve with your checkbook virtually all the practical problems that bedevil ordinary people, you are left in your leisure with nothing but the great human problems to contend with: how to be happy, how to love and be loved, how to find meaning and purpose in your life.”

And with Jesus, it seems the answer to these larger problems of happiness, love, meaning, and purpose can't be addressed by having means, but only by giving them away.

I am always astonished and humbled by generosity. Perhaps not always the generosity of my fellow woman and man, you understand, but that generosity of God that is expressed in the Scriptures. Jesus says that many who are first will be last, and the last will be first. But whether first or last, we all finish this race in God's care. Jesus did not come to condemn the world, rather to upset us in our comfortable presumptions and call us to new life as helpers in this world. He did not condemn the rich man in today's gospel; rather, the gospel says, he loved him. And that is why he told him the one thing that would truly make the difference in his life for good... Trust not in what you have, rather share what you have in this life for the good of others in order to know God's gift of eternal life.