

“Wealth and Baggage, Wisdom and Possibilities”  
Pentecost 19B  
Mark 10:17–31

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Hollywood Lutheran Church

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There is a goofy story told about an American youth who was fascinated with Eastern religion, and after listening to a number of gurus in various cities decided to go to India in search for the truth. When he arrived, he headed immediately for the mountains, looking for a holy man from whom to discover the truth. And before long, he met an impressive looking man that looked like a holy man, at the mouth of a large cave in the side of a steep mountain.

When he approached, the holy man said to the American youth, “Welcome! I perceive that you are a seeker.”

“Well, yes, actually,” said the youth. “How did you know that I am a seeker?”

“Many come here, seeking,” said the holy man. “Many, many. And there is a seeker born every minute.”

The story or joke here is not intended to make fun of Eastern holy men, but of our Western ways of searching for the truth as *tourists*, toting our cameras to exotic places, or searching for truth the way we might go searching for a sale on fine wines or a good buy on vine-ripened tomatoes. We tend to treat wisdom and truth as if they are *commodities* to be acquired, or *trophies* to add to our collection. So it is no wonder that someone will always be ready to try to sell us these commodities.

In the Gospel story here, we have another man, who came to Jesus, supposing him to be a holy man. It is probably that the reputation of Jesus had already spread far and wide, and the man came to him expecting some wonderful words of wisdom. “Good Teacher,” he began — and this is a flattering term, isn’t it? — “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Now, we should understand that the man was *already* religious. We don’t know if that means “religious” in the sense of deep, heartfelt trust in God, or religious in the sense that he did all the right things that good people are supposed to do. He certainly explains himself here as having kept all the rules, all the commandments since he was a young boy. I am sure he received all the appropriate pats on the back for being the best little boy in the world.

And, it seems as if Jesus sensed this about him. If that is what he wants to strive for, or to achieve, he should know all the commandments. and he does. they are—do you think?—like notches in his gun, or accomplishments. I know I’m playing a little loose with comparing this ancient man with people in our times, but I can’t help thinking of that Merit Badge you can earn if you’re in scouting. You are expected to do all kinds of good things, and earn merits until they pin this thing on your uniform to confirm that you’ve done everything exactly right.

But is that “truth”? Is that what we’re seeking when we turn to God? When we think that we hear the call of God in our lives, are we thinking that’s the way to go, or the course to take, in order to have a deep and truthful relationship with God?

The man in this story asks a very specific question of Jesus, and I think it’s still pretty relevant and interesting in our times. Did you notice? He said, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

There are four words here that catch my mind. First, the phrase “eternal life.” How many of our contemporaries in America today are preoccupied with “eternal life.” I read something the other day by someone from Texas, in an area he described as “the buckle on the Bible Belt.” Right there in the middle of America’s most religious geographic area. The focus for many people in those parts, and elsewhere, is getting in to heaven. It is as if there are entrance exams, and we must study

hard, do the right stuff, prepare and then pass those exams in order to “get to heaven.” We have friends right here—far from Texas!, far from the Bible Belt— who come to our Wednesday night studies and talk freely about “getting to heaven.”

And if that is their need, or their question, Jesus plays along: “You know the commandments.”

And the other two words here, in this man’s statement that caught my mind, were “I do.” What must *I do* to inherit eternal life?” His approach to life with God is based on the idea there is something he has to do.

Now, admittedly, people in the Bible Belt aren’t the only ones around who look at things this way. There are conservative Christians with other stripes who also look at things this way. The Catholics are pretty good at laying out a whole plan of behavior, too, and teaching their young people what they have to do. “Holiness” churches are just as strict, and they lay down a long list of rules, and if you don’t obey the rules you cannot stay, and therefore—they want you to know—you cannot “be saved” or “go to heaven.”

Thankfully, this story in the Gospel today takes an interesting turn, because it is not only the man who wants a fuller, better answer, but—as we shall see—the disciples of Jesus did, too.

The man is trying to justify himself by his behavior. But it says, “ Jesus, looking at him, loved him.” Jesus could look past the surface, look past the self-justifying, pride-filled, duty-prone behavior, and see that this individual really has a desire for something deeper than superficial religion.

I believe there are many people in our society, too, who have a longing for something deeper, and more spiritually satisfying than rule-and-behavior religion. Whether or not we are good at obeying all the commandments we can find written in the book, we somehow know that what we are longing for is deeper, or farther, or beyond the requirements or the rules or the things that we can *do* to shine it on with Almighty God.

It is a particular trait of Lutheran preachers to bring to light both the Law and the Gospel and to properly distinguish between them. And so I find both Law and Gospel in this passage. The Law is pretty obvious, isn’t it? If we stand before God, worried about keeping the law, obeying the commandments, however, our relationship to God stays at the surface. Our faith remains superficial. St. Paul would remind us that through the Law comes only the knowledge of sin, that is, our failures or shortcomings, but that knowledge does nothing to bring us into right relationship with God. It is in the Gospel where I come to fully understand the relationship God is offering me, and it has nothing to do with what “I do.”

So, where the man in the story says to Jesus, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” the Gospel would gently say to him, “Nothing. There is nothing that you need to *do* to enter life, because it has all been done *for you* on the cross.” The Cross of Jesus Christ is the emblem of God’s love for humanity—God’s compassion for people who cannot possibly do enough, or be perfect, or accumulate points for a merit badge that would bridge the gulf between our day-to-day lives and eternal life.

“Jesus, looking at him, loved him.” *That* is the Gospel, in a nutshell. That God, in Jesus Christ, looks upon us and loves us, means that our relationship to God is totally different. Think of a parent’s love for a child, or a family’s love for their pets. There is no deserving this kind of love, no payment that can be made, no brownie points that can be earned or saved.

Eleven years ago tomorrow, a young college student named Matthew Shepard died from brain

injuries inflicted by two other guys who found out he was gay, and who beat him severely and left him tied to a fence along a highway in the freezing cold of Wyoming.

This past week, the Matthew Shepard Hate Crimes bill passed the House of Representatives, and a Senate version was adopted earlier. Last night, President Obama pledged to sign the bill when it gets to his desk.

The brutal murder of Matthew Shepard temporarily socked America. But what is perhaps even more shocking is that, at the trial of his killers, Matthew Shepard's parents forgave them for what they did. There is no explaining the love that forgiveness represents, because it is not something that comes out of a system of "good deeds" and earned rewards, or commandments and achievements.

Our relationship to God is based on nothing that we do. It is based only on what God does, and that is symbolized by the Cross and summed up with one word: Love. "Jesus, looking at him, loved him."

So all that we do, as Christians, has no rule in influencing God. All that we do is not necessary to win God's love. But it is our natural *response* to God's love for us. Even our self-discipline, our good deeds, our keeping of the rules, are *responses* to the love we already have.

And so Jesus, looking upon this man who has kept all the commandments since his youth, *knows* that he is ready to go deeper, go further, go beyond that kind of religion, and attain something higher than a seeker who is seeking a prize or trophy. Those who want to travel father with Christ are not born every minute! Those for whom God's love and grace are not the end of the road but its beginning, listen to what Christ calls *from* us.

"You lack one thing," Jesus continues. "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

***Shocked!*** It says that the man was shocked, and he went away grieving, for he had many possessions. To the rich, possessions are a major impediment to faith and trust. At least, I suspect that's the case, but I don't know because I am not rich. I do have a lot of possessions, and probably a lot of them belong in a garage sale! It is easy to accumulate possessions and *not* be rich. But I think what this is saying to me, to us, is that the man who walked away from Jesus, grieving, had a lot of baggage. He was weighed down by his baggage—not only by his wealth and his "stuff," but by his preconceived ideas about God and about eternal life.

It there is a test, it is not an entrance exam for heaven. The test is whether we can let go, in order for God to love us. Can we trust God to be God, to open to us the way of life without our trying to earn it or justify ourselves? Can we accept the love of God and simply love in return, love in response, allowing love to be our guide in daily living?

I said a few minutes ago that is relevant not only to the man in the story, but also to the disciples who kept close company with Jesus. They, too, seem easily hooked by this idea of righteousness tied to behavior, to good deeds, to brownie points. They too don't easily understand that we do not earn points in heaven by our deeds, but we will have treasure when we let go of all that. If the man was *shocked!* at the words of Jesus, it says too that the disciples were *astounded*: "Then who can be saved?"

The truth is, we aren't saved either by our good deeds or by our abstinence or divestiture. We aren't saved by self-denial any more than by self-justification. The Gospel tells us that we are redeemed, blessed, given God's grace in a manner which is completely impossible for mortals to attain. We are given God's grace not by anything we do or anything we are, and only by what God is. For God all things are possible.

It is this same God who created the world by saying “Let there be...” who says to all creation, “I love you. I forgive you. I embrace you.” The Gospel is the news that God loves us as we are, but does not leave us as we are. The Gospel changes who we are into people whom God can use to change the world—through compassion and mercy, generosity and understanding, kindness and forgiveness. Does that sound too hard for you? It *is*. But for God, all things are possible, and you are one of God’s greatest possibilities, ready to be changed by the love you have received in Jesus Christ. Amen.

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