

October 10, 2021 – The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

It's hard to see this interaction between Jesus and a rich man kneeling before him just as it is.

So many blind spots abound.

The man himself can't see them from the beginning.

Jesus seizes on the very first word out of his mouth.

And it's rather curious that he does.

Good?

Why should there be anything wrong with calling Jesus good? Only God is good, Jesus says, but Jesus *is* God, we know, so why quibble on this point?

Suppose why is the better question than what.

If that is the case, Jesus' questioner doesn't see that. He asks "what must I do?" with all sincerity, I don't doubt. He even answers that he has kept the commandments and

there's nothing to suggest he intends to lie to Jesus with this response.

Jesus doesn't look upon him with a roll of the eyes, meet him with a rebuke or approach him with anything but love.

You lack one thing, Jesus said. There is something you can't see yourself, without a fresh set of eyes to look at your situation, he implies.

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

Now, you and I see this Scripture, have probably seen it many, many a time.

What we evidently don't see is an extension of Jesus' command to this man as a command that binds us.

Never have we ever sold all we owned and given it to the poor. Nor are any of us going to go out and do so when we leave this place today.

There are many reasons that can be given to justify that. The rich man surely must be richer than any of us. Love of possessions is not our one overriding problem. We live by faith, not works and we know no single act such as this is going to earn us a place in Heaven. We might assert that we are willing to give up everything in our hearts, check the box and be willing to move on.

But why are we so quick to set this strong and unambiguous demand of Christ aside and look elsewhere for a word we can apply to our lives? Why might I be uncomfortable with this Scripture?

Why *not* remain in that discomfort for a bit?

Why not let Jesus show us what we aren't seeing?

The disciples of Jesus have long been befuddled by this teaching. Thoughts and fears turn to oneself and those we know.

I've got some stuff. Some of you who helped unload our moving truck have witnessed that with your eyes and with your backs and arms and knees as well.

I've got a history, too. Passed down through the generations. The family lore has it that a great-great uncle, I believe it was, had acquired substantial water rights in the Denver area. I can only imagine how much that would be worth today but I'm sure it wasn't anything to sneeze at in the 1920s or Thirties either. Now of course, during that time period, the market crashed and the Great Depression came along.

This long-ago relative began to spend a bit here and a bit there to help friends and loved ones who fell on desperate times during the Depression. He gave and he gave until he himself had little of anything left and died more or less penniless. It may have fallen on other ears differently but to me, it sounded like a cautionary tale.

If I wanted to plead like Peter, I could make a case for having sold almost of what we owned when we left to teach and preach in the Dominican Republic. After a few rounds of yard sales, everything we owned fit into a 2005 Hyundai Accent and the proceeds supported living pretty modestly down there. Some of you have probably already heard Vanessa tell about living among termites and mice and forming an uneasy alliance with a really big spider against the mice, with mixed results.

But it wouldn't hold up to much scrutiny. Some of the families our school served in Santo Domingo lived in homes with dirt floors and without indoor plumbing. Even that humble little subcompact car we left stateside with family represents a lot more wealth than a lot of people on this planet can claim.

Similarly, Peter and his company worried for themselves about having done enough by the standard Jesus presents.

Even they could have thought of someone with less than they had left over than they did when they set on the path of discipleship. Then as now, those with plenty were typically thought of as having been blessed. Deserving of their gains based on their accomplishments and favor in God's eyes. And the committed followers of Jesus would first identify their own standing as it related to the upper class.

We can't see what we can't see.

I can't help but look at Peter's profession and see Jesus' response through a Lutheran lens.

"Don't worry," I hear Christ say, between the lines of another exaggerative-sounding hundredfold of blessings. "You aren't left out. You won't be left out. You will, in fact, have more than you need."

But Jesus' assurance comes with an asterisk. Two little words that serve like a legal disclaimer. His version of

“*serious side effects may occur*” is specifically “*with persecutions.*”

It’s as if to say, yes, you’ll have all the things you worry so much about, even though that’s not what you should be worried about. Houses, fields and even family will not be an adequate security blanket. Trouble will find you, even, maybe *especially*, if you’re doing the right thing.

But instead of worrying about what you have given up or what you may not be able to bring yourself to part with, consider those who may not have had anything to give up to begin with. It’s not about appearances. If it were, Jesus could have told the rich man who he looked upon with love to throw everything he owned into the sea or burned it to ash. On paper, at least, that could have made it even. But no.

He heard “go, sell what you own and give the money to the poor.”

It's this concern of Jesus that is reflected in what we agree to in this church, the ELCA, when accepting a letter of call to ministry. The empowerment of the Holy Spirit to speak for justice on behalf of the poor and oppressed.

We are tasked with widening the lens to see the unseen. The forgotten. Those who are not accorded basic human dignity. Thought of last, as an afterthought if at all. Doing the uncomfortable thing of putting ourselves in their shoes and seeing the world from their point of view. Making connections with them. Going deeper into real relationship.

Discomforting, yes.

As it should be.

Amen.