

What Must I Do?  
Preacher: Rev. Karen E. Gale  
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Mark 10:17-31

A religious revival came to town. The evangelist, after preaching a long, challenging sermon, gave an altar call. "Come to the altar and give your life to Christ!" he said. Nobody came.

In frustration, the evangelist said, "Come to the altar, as a way of saying that you love and honor God." Still nobody came.

In even greater frustration, the evangelist appealed to the congregation, "Come to the altar as a way of saying that you want to live a better life." Nobody came.

Finally, in exasperation he said, "Look, if you love your mother, come down to the altar. Okay?"

This morning's gospel text, sometimes called the story of the rich young ruler, is a hard text. Hard. Jesus is talking about money. Now it's not that Jesus shied away from talking about money. If you look at Jesus' words and parables, 40% of what he said was about money, economic justice, or involved economic metaphors. Jesus was clear. Living a life of discipleship is about a new relationship with money. And today's passage is crystal clear.

Jesus says "give all you have to the poor and follow me."

It is so tempting to water it down. To, like the evangelist, say that this text is about "how bad those really rich people are, too bad they can't be disciples." Or Jesus is asking you to give up some small thing that gets in your way of loving him. Or....

No, this text is as blunt as they come. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" asks the man. "Sell all you have, give it to the poor and follow me."

Actually, let's back up a minute. The scene begins with Jesus about to leave town again. They are all packed up and ready to go. Just then a man comes running up, kneels down before Jesus and asks him a question: "Good teacher..."

Good teacher. It sounds like the man is starting out by flattering Jesus, buttering him up to get the answer he wants. But let's assume the man is sincere. Perhaps he has been waiting on the fringes wanting to ask Jesus these very questions, and only now, as Jesus is leaving, does he dare do it. "What must I do?"

Jesus asks him first: "what about these commandments. Do you keep them?"

And the man says "yes, from my youth." Now that's pretty impressive. No stealing, lying, defrauding, honoring father and mother and all the other commandments. I couldn't say yes to all of that.

And then Jesus says, Ok, you are missing one thing. "Sell all you have and give the money to the poor." And the man walks away sorrowfully because he has many possessions. How many of us would be walking away as well?

We might think it is just the possessions that are holding the man back. He has many nice things that he can't part with. Perhaps. But I imagine it was more what his money did for him, not necessarily bought for him, that is at issue.

In first century times if you had money you had a measure of comfort in your world. You did not starve, you knew your place in society. You had a measure of respect and status in the community. You were "somebody." You had security against an uncertain future and the future in first century times was always uncertain.

Moreover, "in many places in the OT wealth and material goods are considered a sign of God's favor (Job 1:10; Psalm 128:1-2; Isaiah 3:10). That is why the disciples are so astonished that the wealthy cannot enter the Kingdom." (Will Willimon, Pulpit Resource)

People assumed that righteous individuals were in turn blessed by God with wealth. If one was rich, it must be that one was beloved by God and vice versa. Jesus upends this assumption in asking the man to give up these things.

Are we so different? Is it really money that stops us from following Jesus, or what money brings us. In many ways we are just like first century folks. Perhaps we would be happy to give up more of our money. If only the money didn't bring with it so many other comfortable things, non-material things.

Money brings us independence. If we have money, we have illusion that we don't need anyone else. We never have to ask for anything, we can buy it. We can exist apart from others.

Money brings us security, or the illusion of security. If we have money, we can be secure. Nothing bad can happen to us. The bank won't take our house; if we get sick we can get good care, medicine, and doctors. We will be protected.

And money brings us status and standing. Having money feels good. Publicly giving money away can mean prestige in the community; we get our name on a plaque somewhere. Money buys status and power. We are listened to when we have money.

If give away all we have, if we give up money, those things go away.

I think this is reflected when we debate taxes in this country. Higher taxes like in Massachusetts pay for health care for all, pay for full day kindergarten for all. If we give up more of our money, we benefit all. But we lose some of our independence that money buys us.

Now, what I love about this text is that Jesus looked on him with love. Jesus sees into this man's heart, knows he is sincere, and loves him with tenderness. then tells him what he must do to be free, to follow, to be a disciple.

"Give what you have to the poor and follow me." Even the disciples are horrified and as they get on the road they ask Jesus, hey Jesus, we are following you "what are we going to get?"

Jesus is trying to help the man see that achieving the kingdom of God, or eternal life, is not about ticking off a series of boxes:  
follow the commandments, check;  
go to Temple, check.  
It is how one lives that is the key.

This is the antithesis to the prosperity gospel that is especially powerful in this country at some mega churches. The prosperity gospel says, "give everything to God and God will give you

more and more. You'll be blessed with even more riches, more stuff, better cars, a bigger house etc."

Now that's a great stewardship hook! But it is a lie.

No, Jesus says, give it all to the poor and follow me and there you will find your reward. As he says to the disciples, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life." The one who leaves all these behind will find new relationships and new work and persecutions, too. Achieving eternal life is about the work we do in this life, among these people. It's what we give now.

You see, if we hold on so hard to what we have, our things, our money, the illusive security that it brings, we miss what is real: the opportunity, the challenge, the life work of ministry with Jesus. Our energies get so trapped in protecting what we might lose, that our hearts no longer remain open to how we might serve or see Jesus in our midst.

The French have a story about a millionaire in his palace who spent his days counting his gold. Beside the palace was a poor cobbler who spent his days singing as he repaired people's shoes. The joyful singing irritated the rich man. One day he decided to give some gold coins to the cobbler. At first the cobbler was overjoyed, and he took the coins and hid them. But then he would be worried and go back to check if the coins were still there. Then he would be worried in case someone had seen him, and he would move the coins and hide them in another place. During all this, he ceased to sing. Then one day he realized that he had ceased to sing because of the gold coins. He took them back to the rich man and said, "take back your coins and give me back my songs." (textweek.com)

The opposite of rich is not poor, but free.

The same is true for us. What happens when you buy nice camera? Wow, you enjoy it. But then you have to care for it. And you have to watch out for it—what if you drop it or someone steals it? Then you need insurance for it. And maybe it comes with complicated directions. So when you go for a walk on some nice beach, you spend all your time focused on knobs and buttons, squinting through this little viewfinder. And you have to watch passers by carefully to see who might steal the camera.

You certainly can't go swimming--what if someone steals the camera?  
And you better check the weather--what if it might rain?

What kind of experience are you now having at beach? How does having a thing change how you look at people? Suddenly they are not fellow beachgoers enjoying the afternoon. They are potential thieves.

We do the same with our money: protect it, invest it, harbor it against an uncertain future--OUR uncertain future. Not the uncertain present of those Jesus asks us to love.

So preacher, you ask, what does that mean for me, living my daily life. Am I only going to follow Jesus if I become destitute and in poverty?

Yes, that is what Jesus asks.

Others have done so. St. Francis of Assisi, the Buddha, Dorothy Day.

What is clear that discipleship begins when the thing that entraps us is renounced and all its claims upon us are dissolved. For most of us that thing is money or what it can buy.

But you ask, how do we get there? Let me tell you two stories.

A while back I went clothes shopping as this past year has brought with it an increase in pants size. I didn't have any pants that fit. So, I went shopping at Savers, the used clothing store near me. And tried on pants. And came home with a pair of aspirational jeans. These are pants that almost fit. And they look really good. And they make me feel good, not my usual experience with jeans. And they are home in my closet waiting for me to give up that which stands between me and my health really: to choose better foods, more exercise, that which gives me more life, more energy, less weight.

They are not aspirational jeans where I look at them and feel good. They are aspirational, meaning I look at them and am moved to change.

So it is a process. But this metaphor only takes us so far. Because Jesus did not say, oh, just give a little bit when the offering plate goes by or when you see the Salvation Army bucket or when your niece bugs you to sponsor her band trip. A little bit more and you'll get there.

Jesus says "give it all to the poor and follow me." Jesus asks us to think seriously about money--what we do with it, what fear and worry we are willing to give up to be able to follow him down the road.

I grew up believing in tithing. Not that this was said aloud, but I believed that if I was to live my life by this formula, save ten percent, give away ten percent and live on the rest, that I would be happy and everything would be fine. I would stop having that nagging feeling of needing to give more.

Many years I have chosen to tithe. Some years I have not, usually out of worry of poverty or what I would give up. But when I hear Jesus saying, give all you have to the poor and follow me. Follow me. Follow me. Give it all away. Follow me. I feel pulled and uncomfortable.

I find I have have a restless heart. When I contemplate poverty in the developing world, or homelessness in Plymouth where I live, or the growing income gap between rich and poor, that nagging feeling is there. When I weigh whether to buy this gadget or that, the nagging feeling is there. When I think about the Christmas season and get a little ill about all the gift giving that seems ever out of control, I hear this message.

"Give it away and follow me." And, like the young man, I go away sorrowfully for I have many possessions. For I have a complicated relationship to money. For I am resistant to giving up that illusion of independence and security.

We are in the stewardship season here at Pilgrim.. It is a time when you are asked by members of this church, our church leadership, to pledge to next year's budget. To pledge a gift to the ministry of Jesus in this place.

Now I am not demanding that you sell all you have and give all your money to church. (Though we would certainly receive it gladly)

No, I am asking you to think seriously about money in your life. Your relationship to money, and how it keeps you from living fully into who you are to be, keeps you from following Jesus who calls you into life in all its fullness and challenge. How is Jesus calling you as you think about the money you make and have? How is Jesus calling you to give what you have away, to the

poor, to the oppressed, to the work of the church and the work that goes on outside the church.

Jesus tells us that when we give our money away, we find freedom. In disentangling ourselves from what we think money secures for us, we find freedom. In giving and giving away, we find ourselves more able to say to Jesus, yes, I am coming. I will follow you.

This is how I hope the story ended for this young man. Just because we see him walking away at the end of this morning's scripture reading does not mean he did not go home and wrestle and think on it. He may have embarked upon the journey of freeing himself to follow Jesus. He may have called his broker and arranged for a sale. He may have handed his businesses off to his employees. He may have later run down the road after the disciples saying "wait for me."

For Jesus looked into his heart and loved him. And then challenged him to a life of discipleship.

Jesus looks into our hearts and loves us. And then challenges us to a life of discipleship.

Sell all you have and give it to the poor and come and follow me...

Amen.