

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost • October 11, 2009

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Mark 10:17-31

"You Can't Take It With You" – Fall Stewardship Focus, Part 2

When you hear the expression "You can't take it with you," **what's the "it" that comes to mind?** When you first think about that, I'm guessing that the answer to the question would be "stuff," material things – or maybe even immaterial things, like wealth. After all, that's the context in which we're most likely to hear that phrase used. Most people in our world today don't think that they should be buried in elaborate tombs like the pharaohs of ancient Egypt, surrounded by their treasures in an effort to bring their possessions along with them into the afterlife. But it doesn't work that way, does it? At the end of life, we leave behind everything that we've worked for, all the wealth we've acquired. "You can't take it with you."

Now, although *that* might be the popular understanding of this phrase, our Gospel text today presents a different understanding. We hear of this rich young man who comes – running – to talk with Jesus, to ask the Good Teacher a question. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" It sounds like he's got a good question, like he's seeking the right answers. He professes that he has kept God's commandments in his relationships with the people around him. But Jesus tells the young man that he lacks one thing, that he should go and sell all that he has, giving to the poor. And so the man walks away. But why? **Why do Jesus' words leave him disheartened and sorrowful? And should they have the same effect on us?**

[Object exercise: relocation.] If I asked to you get up and move from your spot on one side of the sanctuary and move to the far side, how hard would it be for you to carry out that request? If you don't have anyone else with you in your pew, chances are pretty good that you can just get up and go. But if you have your family with you – especially if you have young children – the degree of difficulty for such a move jumps up quite quickly. Or what if you just don't want to move? Perhaps you've made a habit out of sitting in a particular place, and moving to a different area would just be too jarring, too much of a shake-up for your liking. It's hard to move when you're attached to where you're at. **These attachments – physical, mental, or emotional stuff – become baggage. And baggage makes it hard to get up and go.**

As was the case with the young man, we can't follow Jesus if we're valuing *anything* more than God. Even if this man were somehow able to follow all the commandments Jesus mentioned, he is evidently falling short when it comes to the First Commandment: "You shall have no other gods." The rich young man's wealth has become his idol. And that's a struggle that many of us share today. **It comes back to "You can't take it with you"; but here, the "it" isn't stuff or wealth – it's the reliance on money and possessions that has become the stumbling block, the baggage that weighs down.** The young man's great possessions have become the obstacle to meeting his greatest need.

Wealth can be a great resource; however, it can be an even greater danger, one which persuades us to trust in our possessions to see us through life. Take a look at our text and see how Jesus' disciples reacted to his teaching on wealth: they were "amazed" and "exceedingly astonished" at what he said. And why? In their day, they assumed that the rich people were those who had found favor with God – the cream of the crop – so they couldn't imagine that people with great wealth would find it difficult to enter the kingdom of God, to gain eternal life. But wealth cannot save. And because riches often convey a false sense of confidence, someone who has great possessions has just that much more baggage that might keep him from following Christ. This is why Jesus taught his hearers that it would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich

person to enter the kingdom of God: we cannot give up our baggage on our own; we cannot follow Jesus of our own volition.

So why did Jesus say what he did to the rich young man? What hope did the Good Teacher offer him? Jesus knew what the man lacked, and he confronted him with the reality of that need. Jesus knew him, and he loved him. Jesus knows you, and he loves you. **In his love, he forgives you and me for putting our confidence in the money and possessions that have been entrusted to our care.** In his love, he lifts our baggage and frees us from their weight. In his love, he makes it possible for us to follow him and live as his people.

Because Christ is at work in those he has called, Christians can put our wealth to use in service. God does not need our riches, but there are many around us who do. This fall, as we consider what Christian stewardship means and what it looks like, we need to think about how we use our riches. Here in America, we have “great possessions” when compared to most of the rest of the people of the world. Even the poor among us are better off than many in other nations. Jesus instructed the rich young man to sell all that he had and give to the poor. Charity is good and must be part of the Christian life, yet we know that it does not earn eternal life. **Christians should give to those in need as we are able, not hoarding our wealth but putting it to wise use in working as Jesus’ hands and feet in caring for those in need.** You don’t have to give a fixed percentage of your income to a congregation or charity (though you might find that to be a helpful and healthy practice). But you and I do need to consider how we use money and possessions, reflecting on current practice and being honest about the baggage that we might keep trying to pick up.

Jesus also provides us with the assurance that he provides for us. Those who follow him may have to leave behind house and brother and sister and mother and land for his sake and for the sake of the gospel we proclaim. But God provides more than we leave behind. He draws us into the fellowship of the Church with other believers, giving us homes and brothers and sisters and mothers and lands through each other. And in following Christ, we will also encounter persecutions and hardship, things that would try to turn us away from Jesus, away from God’s love. But like Jesus’ first disciples, can have confidence in that self-giving love as we also look ahead to the age to come and eternal life.

We can’t take it with us – but in his grace, Jesus takes us with him.

Amen.