

Sermon for October 10, 2021
Proper 23
Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico
The Rev. Canon Raymond Raney

Job 23:1-9, 16-17
Psalm 22:1-15
Hebrews 4:12-16
Mark 10:17-31

What Must I Do To Inherit Eternal life?

In the Gospel from Mark, Jesus is on the road again, journeying somewhere, when a man runs up to him, kneels and asks:
“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

If you read this Gospel without reflecting on it much, I’d be willing to bet that most of us would come to this conclusion: anyone with any money is going NOT going to heaven.

But when we consider the entirety of this periscope, the question goes deeper that is obvious.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Seems like a simple question. It’s a little grander than “What must I do to be saved?” Just to be saved can imply, how do I get out of here in one piece?

That shortfall bargain is made by all of us at one time or another: Get me out of through this and I’ll do [fill in the blank]...

But “Eternal Life” beckons a much grander question into the conversation.

We find out from the story that the man is well off. In fact, in other Gospels, he is the Rich Young Ruler. He has many possessions.

We assume he’s rich because Jesus goes into a discussion of the difficulty of rich people getting into the Kingdom of God.

By implication in the text we see Jesus equating eternal life with the Kingdom of God as one in the same. And there is much more to the request than just salvation.

The man wants to inherit "Eternal Life."

That would imply a desire for a familial relationship.

He seems to be asking Jesus for inclusion into the family of followers traveling with Jesus.

Obviously the man believes Jesus has the answer he seeks, and there is the rub.

Jesus looks at the man, and the text says he "loved him," and says, "You lack one thing."

That's the catch.

He's told to sell all he has, give it to the poor, and "then, come, follow me." It's not that easy.

"When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions."

Obviously the man's possessions possessed him.

He is not alone.

What to do with all those possessions?

That's an issue for a lot of us these days. We like our stuff. We like our stuff so much that a whole industry started for off-site storage where you can rent space to store stuff you don't have room for at home.

The idea of a commercial place to store stuff goes back a long way to ancient China.

The business in the U.S. dates to the 1850s, but it wasn't until the 1960s that self-storage really began to take off.

The first storage facility with garage-style doors was built in Texas in 1964 and they spread from there.

The latest figures I saw was that there are about 59,500 self-storage facilities in the United States. That's more than the number of McDonald's restaurants.

Storage units occupy about 2.3 billion square feet and earn an estimated \$39.5 billion a year.

The average unit goes for \$88.85 a month for a 10x10 space. About 9.5% of households rent space for an average of 14 months.

We all have a lot of stuff.

With Christmas coming up ...

[A short commercial for the Trinity Tidings: In the October issue, I'm asking folks to consider getting their shopping done by the First Sunday of Advent – November 28, the Sunday after Thanksgiving. This will allow all of us to spend our time in Advent anticipation of the Search Committee preparing the Parish profile to seek applicants to be your next rector next Spring. Please consider my request.]

Anyway, with Christmas coming up, we'll be giving each other more stuff, and maybe we'll have to rent more space to store the stuff we move out to make room for the stuff we get. We love our stuff.

I can't claim any immunity from stuff. We have a three-car garage, and used to rent two-thirds of it to a Santa Fe architect. The other third is used to store a lot of our stuff. It's mostly books. I've given away a lot of them, probably twenty or thirty boxes. And I have about that many left.

So, is Jesus saying that wealth is bad?

No. Jesus was not averse to relying on others to support him and his disciples on the road. He had friends of means. So what is Jesus saying?

I remember reading a treatise on the story of the rich man by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran theologian who was killed by the Nazis at the end of World War II for his involvement in the plot to assassinate Hitler. According to Bonhoeffer, the fault with the rich man was not his inability to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor. It was that he did not turn to Jesus and “follow” the teacher.

How hard is it to follow Jesus?

It is much easier to believe in Jesus. The difficulty is in following Jesus. Jesus calls us all to do, not just believe. To follow Jesus is to love God and love our neighbor. The message is to care for one another.

Imagine yourself walking up to Jesus and asking: “what do I have to do?”

So what is that Jesus would ask you to give up?

Every time I’ve been plunged into new “adventures” in faith I have to confront my own fears. When I studied at Presbyterian Hospital for Clinical Pastoral Education we were each assigned to a primary floor. The one I didn’t want was the cancer unit. So guess which unit I was assigned? Yup. The cancer unit.

I believe sin is what separates us from God. Sometimes that’s a conscious thing and sometimes unconscious. That’s what Jesus is asking the man to leave behind – the possessions that separate him from God.

So what would Jesus ask you to get rid of?

What are those things in your life that keep you from accepting the gift of God’s direction in your life?

What things would you rather not deal with?

What one thing would you hold back?

Those questions troubled the disciples. “They were greatly astounded and said to one another, ‘Then who can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’”

Amen.