

"WHAT WAS JESUS REALLY SAYING ABOUT WEALTH?"

Date: Oct. 15, 2006

Text: Mark 10: 17-31

Preached by: Bob Kaiser, First Presbyterian Church, Batavia, NY

As many of you know, I select sermon subjects two months in advance using the lectionary's suggested readings as a preliminary guide. The lectionary Gospel text for this week looks at Jesus' dealings with a wealthy merchant as recorded in Mark 10. The very same week the text was selected Time magazine had a front cover that asked, "Does God Want You to Be Rich?" The featured article proceeded to talk about churches pushing a gospel of prosperity and their growing success. Have their kind of faith and you will get rich. Every bone in my body wanted to shout, "No! No! No!" It's the wrong question and only feeds into the American inclination to follow whatever course seems to lead to the easy life. These churches even distort one of my favorite Bible verses from John 10: Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly." Jesus meant something much more than monetary gain but not according to the gospel of prosperity. So much for my raving and ranting. Let's look at our text and see what our Lord really had to say about wealth.

A man approached Jesus. What do we know about him? Some writers say that he was rich, others that he was young. What we do know is that he apparently had enough interest in religion to have sought Jesus out and that he had been trying to live by the 10 Commandments. On this basis, he probably was a lot like us. We are looking to Jesus and we try to live by the Commandments. Our answer to our Lord's question probably wouldn't be much different than that of the man in Mark. And, as scripture, says, Jesus loves us just as he loved the person who engaged him in this conversation.

What's the problem, then? Our Lord sensed that this individual was holding something back. His commitment to God's way only went so far and no further. Could it be that Jesus also knows something about our religious lives? It's pretty easy to make Christ a part of daily living up to a point but beyond that to beg off.

The man looked back to the 10 Commandments and that is exactly where the dilemma is rooted. The 1st Commandment in Exodus 20 states that there are to be no other gods before the Almighty. Now gods are not just ancient idols but anything in life that one would put ahead of loyalty to the one holy God. The longer I live with the 1st Commandment the more I realize that it is the cutting edge of true faith. Almost without recognizing what is happening, other gods are lifted up in our lives and given places of honor. Family, prestige, recreation, sports, money, patriotism, so many things in life can be our gods.

Jesus, as so often happened, went right to the heart of the man's spiritual problem. His affluence appeared to be more important than his loyalty to God. Jesus was and is looking for radical dependence. The story isn't really about wealth at all. Jesus didn't care if the man gave all of his wealth, half or a tithe. What he was concerned about was that the man was holding back part of himself in his relationship with his Maker. God doesn't want to share the center of one's being with other gods, be it money or something else. The message to the man, then to the disciples and now to us is: Are you willing to go the 2nd mile in relationships, in a commitment to peace and justice, in the use of time, talent and money?

You can breathe a sigh of relief if you were worried that this was a sermon specifically about money. It's not a stewardship sermon though it certainly applies. On the other hand, a word of caution still goes out as we hear the text. The idea of radical dependence, of serving

God before all else, may not set well or come easy in life. I saw a cartoon once in which a man said "I'm not religious but I'm not worried because I live a decent life. I think I measure up pretty nearly to what I should be." A friend replies, "Well, a parachute that NEARLY works isn't the same as a parachute that works."

Human beings always are trying to serve God with the leftovers of life: spare time, spare money. God wants something more. It's not a matter of every waking minute being God consumed. Rather it is a matter of making sure that as we live each day that loving God and loving others is a motivating force in shaping our behavior. Let me say personally that radical dependence upon God is something that I struggle with each day, always have and probably always will. It's not easy to turn the center of life over to the Almighty. We don't want to give up our power and control. There are some days when I almost literally wear out the AA adage "let go and let God." Not one of us is ever going to be perfect in placing God at the center. We need to know as we struggle with living faithfully that God always is there to help us and to pick us up when we falter. Indeed just in making the effort toward discipleship, the divine partnership grows. Even as we stumble and fail, God's love moves us forward.

The text is not about money but about commitment. However, let's be honest and confess that often money and what it purchases is the biggest idol in many a life. That was certainly true for the man who approached Jesus and it is true for many Christians today. Someone once said, "The hazard of wealth lies in the fact that means have a way of becoming ends." Such diverse Christians as Peter Gomes, chaplain at Harvard and Jerry Falwell of the Moral Majority agree on this point: How easily the more we have leads to wanting even more.

One day a father of a very wealthy family took his son on a trip to the country with the firm purpose of showing his son how poor people can be. They spent a couple of days and nights on the farm of what would be considered a very poor family. On their return from their trip the father asked his son, "How was the trip?" "It was great, Dad." Did you see how poor people can be?" "Oh Yeah," said the son. "So what did you learn from the trip?" Asked the father. The son answered, "I saw that we have a dog and they had four. We have a pool that reaches to the middle of our garden and they have a creek with no end. We have imported lanterns in our yard and they have stars at night. Our patio reaches to the front yard and they have the whole horizon. We have a small piece of land to live on and they have fields that go beyond our sight. We have servants who serve us, but they serve others. We buy our food, but they grow theirs." We have walls around our property to protect us, they have friends to protect them." With this the boy's father was speechless. Then his son added, "Thanks Dad for showing me how poor we are." That young boy would have understood Jesus' message to the rich man.

The scriptural story asks us: Have the things of life so gotten a hold of us that they keep us from moving in the direction we really want to go? No one can answer that question for you but it is worth considering.

Jesus kept talking about putting God first in shaping one's life plans. He talked of serving others. People who have begun to take seriously these words and have allowed Christ to lead them have made a most remarkable discovery: Jesus was right on the mark or to use our morning theme, "right on the money", when he said that commitment is the way to make all of our inner spiritual dreams come true. It's those individuals who "let go and let God" who discover new living patterns even in the midst of the same old life circumstances and who find a new richness to each day.