

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

“He looked at him, and loved him”

This week’s gospel is usually the kick-off to the Stewardship season, the rich, young man being exhorted to sell what he owns and give the money to the poor. Those who are wealthy don’t get much praise here at all. As Jesus tells us, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter heaven. This all rings horribly true this year, when many are feeling very hurt and betrayed by those who manage money and savings. Some of us feel that we would have been better giving it all to the poor, at least someone would have gained something that way.

As I was preparing for this sermon I was struck by a set of emotions that coursed through me. Before I went off to seminary, I had this Pollyanna idea that it would all be some amazing spiritual retreat and that at the end of three years I would emerge as a fully formed, well grounded priest. I arrived, found my room, collected my schedule. “Oh yes!” I thought to myself, Old Testament, New Testament, Spirituality, Chapel practice; we would be sitting in a room in meditation all day, which had been my experience of Bible Study up until then. Did we study the Bible, oh yes? Did we go to Chapel three times a day, oh yes? But what I quickly realized after the first pop quiz on the Holy Land Map was that it was just like any other degree course. Just as any other student, we had to figure out our teacher’s idiosyncracies, work out which credits to take and when, chart out our assignments, check the chapel schedule to see when we were on to read, or serve or lead in worship. It had a strange Hogwarts feel to it and as I read this passage this morning I realized what it was that was missing. For all of us it was focused on a goal. Learn the books of the Bible, learn Greek or Hebrew, pass New Testament, Old Testament, and Spirituality – get done with it so we can begin ministry!

Just like this young man. “What do I need to do?” was on my lips so many times as I struggled to get to the end point, reach the goal. And then, one morning as I trudged early in the morning towards the Chapel, having left my little one, sick at home with the babysitter, and the last place I wanted to be was going to the Chapel that day, and I just felt I can’t do this anymore; I heard my heart speak – “Did you think it would be easy? Did you think it would be just doing all this for the sake of it?” “Come, pick up your cross, follow me.”

Just like the young man who protested "*Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.*" I had missed the point of what I was doing. I thought it was about following the schedule –not about how. "*Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one*

thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

Jesus looks at him and loved him; just as I too felt that love that day. "Jesus looks at us and loves us in our weakness. That has to be one of the tenderest moments in the scripture. To follow Jesus is not just about following the law in this young man's case, or about following the course requirements, it is much, much more. It is about the heart, the spirit, the intention, faith...trust. Spirit is the life breath that blows across the creation in the beginning. It is the breath that we inhale and exhale. It is the spirit that gives us life in what we do. Some might say passion. This young man has lost the plot. He is so intent on following the plan, that he has missed the point entirely. We are told that his worldly wealth is an impediment. Give it up says Jesus for treasure in heaven.

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

Clearly this was not what this young, rich man wanted to hear. Not what we want to hear either, right? But the point is not just about money and wealth, but more how it deludes us into thinking that we have control, power, insulation. This year has been an education on that point. We have all seen how money and wealth are just an illusion. But we have also seen that they lead us astray. And yes, we have all been grieving the loss of our wealth – or the idea of our wealth.

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle – because the pursuit and acquisition of wealth tears us away from humility and trust in God. *"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."* This young man could never be assured by his actions, by his adherence to the laws and commandments. Jesus goes on to tell us that even that may not look fair to us, *"But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."*

That last piece is for God alone, human constructs will not work we are told *"the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.* It is our intentions of the heart that matter. This young man wanted his salvation by entitlement for following the letter of the law. His heart was elsewhere, which is why he grieved. For me, on that day walking across the close, I realized that it was in my heart that I needed to be, in my passion and spirit, not purely seeing the journey as a means to an end. My stumbling block was I had lost my passion. That day I realized that my passion was what it was about, and in that moment I was saved.

"Jesus looked at him and loved him" as he does us, always. We are not forsaken. Even when we feel that we have been abandoned, or lost our way, our faith will sustain us.

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