

Sermon: Mark 10:17-31 (Proper 23B)
Christ Church Riverdale, 11 October 2009
The Rev. Robert C. Lamborn, Rector

^{NRS} **Mark 10:17** As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"¹⁸ Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone."¹⁹ You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother."²⁰ He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth."²¹ 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."²² When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.²³ Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"²⁴ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."²⁶ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?"²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."²⁸ Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you."²⁹ Jesus said, "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,³⁰ 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."³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

"Your money or your life?" What Jesus has to say to the rich man who comes to him for advice seems to boil down to an expression familiar from old movies and television shows, when a robber pulls someone into a dark alley and demands, "Your money or your life?" It's a startling question, a frightening question, especially coming from Jesus, because what's at stake isn't just the cash the man is carrying, but everything he owns, everything he's worked for. And what's at stake isn't *physical* life but *eternal* life.

"Your money or your life?" Ordinarily this is a no-brainer: "Here's my wallet; leave me alone!" But in this case, the man goes away grieving, grieving because of his many possessions. This is the *only* time in Mark's gospel when Jesus says, "Follow me," and the person doesn't. Faced with a choice between his money and eternal life this man seems to have chosen his money, and Jesus says, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"

The disciples are amazed at what Jesus says, because people believed that anyone with money had obviously been blessed by God. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" is a question of somebody who knows where his next meal is coming from, somebody whose bills are paid up and who has money in the bank. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" is a concern of someone who has enough time to ponder the great questions of religion. Rich people could study and pray and keep the Sabbath correctly when some other Jews had to work on Saturday just to survive. Rich people had the resources to do good deeds with the money God had blessed them with. This man who runs and kneels before Jesus has lived a righteous life.

Probably *because* he's been so righteous and faithful, he believes that there is more, and he yearns for that something more. That yearning leads the man to an itinerant preacher named Jesus.

It's easy to dislike this guy--he's rich, he's righteous and he says so. It's easy to show little sympathy toward him, but we read that Jesus *loved* him. The man must have been sincere, not pompous; Jesus isn't antagonistic toward him, but responds with love to this man who is so desperately seeking eternal life. So Jesus answers the man's question, answers it with great love: "Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."

Jesus' loving response was not to demand that the man do one more good deed, but to invite him on a process of renunciation followed by commitment. Go-sell-give is renunciation, renunciation of the security of material things. Come-follow is commitment, commitment to a new way of life. This commitment to follow Jesus is part and parcel of eternal life; eternal life not as something we earn, but as relationship we live with God and each other. Jesus shows the way of eternal life, but the man goes away; he goes away grieving.

When our hands are closed, holding on tight to something, refusing to let go; when our hands are holding something, no matter how valuable it is, then there's no way for us to receive something else, not even something far more wonderful than what we're holding onto. Only hands that are open and empty are hands ready to receive. Jesus calls the rich man to open his hands and to let go of his wealth, riches that would pale by comparison with the richness of the experience of following Jesus. So are we called to open our own hands, and to let go whatever substitutes for eternal life that we have been clinging to so tightly; to open our hands through the exercise of stewardship.

143 years ago yesterday Christ Church was dedicated, and so we remember and honor a group of people in the 1860s who could've kept their hands closed. It would've cost less for these Riverdalians to keep going to church in Yonkers or Kingsbridge. But their minds and hearts were set on more than what would cost less in the short run, and the result is what you see around you--the building--and more importantly *who* you see around you--the community of faith that has not just endured for generations, but has served for generations.

You will be invited to submit a pledge in four weeks--your best prayerful judgment of how you will be able to open your hand to your church in sharing the material gifts God has blessed you with, to join the Riverdalians of the 1860s and the thousands of Christ Church members over the generations since from all the surrounding area. "Your money or your life?" When Jack Benny was asked this question, he didn't answer right away, and so the robber pushed him: "C'mon, your money or your life?!" "I'm thinking; I'm thinking!" Benny would reply. In the case of church, we want you to take time to think *and* to pray, to reflect and to be thankful. Our money and our lives are gifts from God, gifts like love, that don't diminish when we share them but grow and grow as we share them in God's service.