

Searching as though our lives depend upon it

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Buddy Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, October 11, 2009: The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Mark 10:17-31.*

Something about the way this story is usually treated in sermons has always bothered me. The Gospel of Mark refers to the protagonist simply as the “man”; Matthew adds that he is young and Luke identifies him as a ruler. All three, though, agree that he is rich, very rich. Church leaders rarely fail to pick up on that fact! This story is a jackpot for preachers who are saddled with the responsibility of preaching stewardship sermons. For those of you who are not on the inside, that is code language for sermons about money—particularly about your money and even more particularly about getting you to give yours to the church. True to form, by sermon end you no doubt will hear some of that from me as well.

But this is not really a story about money or possessions even though it does have at least one very good sound bite. “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.” Something about that relieves us, making us feel good in part because very few of us consider ourselves rich. Not really. Rich is someone who has more than we have. The fact that in comparison to a huge percentage of the world we are rich as Croesus does not change that. We still don’t think we are rich; and if we are not rich, so the thinking goes, maybe this story doesn’t have much to do with us.

I think it does. In fact, I know it has something to do with me. The main character in this story is not exactly a hero. On the

contrary, preachers often paint him as one who misses the boat. Not so for me. I find him quite compelling. Approaching Jesus almost breathlessly, he asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life? What must I do to find meaning? Surely, teacher, there is more to life than this,” he wondered, “more than this life I am living.” This is the cry of a desperate man, a man in search of purpose and meaning, and a man who is honest enough to admit that there is a deep hole in the center of his being. In that sense he is utterly modern, postmodern, whatever we are at this point.

His search has ceased to be academic; so earnest, it is as though his life depends upon it. The scripture says that he “ran up to Jesus and knelt before him,” seeking to find what all his righteous living (and he was very righteous) would not give him—genuine meaning. He “ran to Jesus.” That is quite an image. Jewish men of a certain class did not run, and, yet, he did.

Long before we get to the twist about his possessions, there is much to be learned from him. It takes great courage to so openly search, particularly for adults. We sometimes regard those who continue to struggle so openly as unsettled and somehow incapable of being happy or getting it together. If it has been a long time since we have wanted something badly enough to run for it, if we see ourselves as too old, too smart, too sophisticated to want something that deeply, we probably need to think again. None of us has arrived; the search goes on. And

if we have become so satisfied with our conclusions about life and God and the world, we stand, it seems to me, in great peril—in peril of living anesthetized and shallow lives, lives indeed that get smaller and smaller.

In being drawn to this man, I am in good company; the scripture reports that Jesus, even knowing that the man will not do as commanded looks at him and loves him. Mark, who is quite spare with his words, found Jesus' loving countenance toward this man memorable and worthy of mention. It must have been an intense gaze of love. I find that remarkable, beautiful, and comforting. Jesus encounters a flailing and flawed man and loves him—not because of all his achievement and goodness but in spite of it and certainly not because he is about to give away all he has. In that wonderful way that scripture is about us as much as about the characters in the story, this passage tells us that seen just as we are, God knows us, loves us, and continues to call us to our deepest truth.

In the short run, such truth is not easy to hear. It wasn't for the rich man. Jesus told him to sell all his possessions, to give the money to the poor, and to follow him. Why did he tell him that? Jesus did not require that of all who came to follow him. Some of his closest followers were people of means, whose hospitality he often enjoyed. So was it some newly heightened sense of concern for the poor that motivated him to give this particular instruction to the seeker? There was more to it than that I think.

Jesus loved *this* guy and was thinking about *him* at that moment, not the rest of the world. It seems to me that this is how God works: coming to us as we are, God transforms individuals. This is that to which scripture is referring when the claim is made that “God knows the number of hairs

on our heads”—not that God has volumes of useless information about such unimportant things as how many hairs are on our heads but that God knows *us*. Jesus spoke the truth *to him that he needed to hear*. The great sadness, of course, is that he couldn't hear it. The story says he was shocked—another translation reads crestfallen—and that he went away very sad, still owning his many possessions but losing his life. Our story stops there; but in my sequel, a little known and as yet unpublished version, I know that later he came to himself and returned—this time a lot less starched, considerably less encumbered, dramatically more joyful, and wealthy in a way he never dreamed possible. Once you have given yourself over to the journey, stopping for long really isn't an option.

What is this saying to us? Are we supposed to sell all that we have and give the proceeds to the poor? I don't know. Who can say, but I don't really think so. I know I am not going to do that, and I take great comfort in knowing that God's loving me is not dependent upon that one action. And, yet, I do think that this story has something to do with how and where we focus our lives and that that involves the question of how we use our resources. Money is a powerful medium, arguably the most powerful in our culture; and how and where we give it declares a great deal about that to which we give our hearts. In fact, how we spend our money may tell more of our story than any other thing about us.

If we get this straight and finally understand what stewardship is all about, what will we get in return? Salvation? No, God has already taken care of that. Salvation never has had anything to do with what we do or don't do; it's a gift whether we give God everything or not a nickel. Peace and prosperity? No, not necessarily. We

may start giving like crazy and find our lives in deeper turmoil than ever and our fortunes diminished.

Because I want you to give generously—unashamedly I want that—particularly this hard year for us, I wish I could promise that giving means getting in some quid pro quo sort of way. You can find preachers all over the country who will tell you just that—that if you give, God will bless you with great prosperity. Sorry. I could be wrong, of course, but I just don't think that it works that way. It would be easier for keepers of the institution like me if only it were so and certainly better marketing. But the truth, as I see it, is we give because we love God and because we believe that our parish is one way, an imperfect one but a good one, of bringing God's goodness on earth—or at least to our little corner of the earth.

So it won't save us; it won't make us rich. What will it do for us? Will we get anything

in return? Yes, indeed we will. We get a sense of life that is truly eternal, a sense of eternal life that begins right now not as a reward for our giving but as an outgrowth of it, a life that is properly ordered, a life in which God is God and material things are neither hated nor adored but simply understood for what they can give us and for what they cannot give us. That is huge, my friends—an ordered life with clear priorities. Huge.

Looking at him, Jesus loved him—just as he was—incomplete, becoming, in process, and often filled with fears that would not allow him to let go of his possessions. Looking at us, Jesus loves us—just as we are, sometimes faithful and generous, sometimes fearful and tightfisted, often somewhere in the middle. But we are loved by a love that changes us, a love which invites us to change the world.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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