

19th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 23B
Amos 5:6-7,10-15
Church
Psalm 90:12-17
Hebrews 4:12-16
Mark 10:17-31

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I haven't seen the new Michael Moore movie, but I noticed it was mentioned in the fact-checker column of the *Oregonian*. Moore's premise is that the rich keep getting richer while everyone else is left behind. He quotes a shocking statistic: In the US the richest 1% have more financial wealth than the bottom 95% combined. That's so unsettling that some people disputed it, quibbling because there are different methods of measuring wealth. Still the independent fact-checkers concluded that when you count in assets like boats, airplanes, helicopters, second homes, businesses and art collections, then yes, it's true. The richest 1% of Americans do have more financial wealth than the bottom 95% of us put together. (*Oregonian*, 10/6/09)

When we hear that, it stirs up a bunch of stuff in us. Stuff like indignation, resentment and envy. As much as we may scorn the ultra-rich, most red-blooded Americans do want a piece of that privilege.

It's part of the complex relationship we have with money and wealth. Consumerism is what powers the American economy and culture. Getting and spending is not just what we do to meet basic needs. It's what we do to gain happiness, status, and security. And we always want more. We Americans are so obsessed with money we may not notice, but those from other nations are quick to point out how much stuff we own, how much garbage we throw out, and how the almighty dollar drives our priorities. The recession has changed people's circumstances but not their essential values. Even if we don't have much money right now, we still believe in the power of money. We may trust our souls to God in an ultimate sense, but day to day we place our trust in our bank accounts. There's a way in which we believe, deep down, that our money and our possessions can save us. You see the danger.

And insidious moral judgments can creep in. Having wealth has often been seen as a sign of God's blessing. Think of the "prosperity gospel" mega-churches who preach that God wants you to be rich. It's blatant materialism, but it sure does sell. On the other hand, not having money has been seen as a sign of God's displeasure or your own moral failure. Think of the moralistic judgments some people make against welfare mothers. But that kind of pietistic judgment breaks down when confronted with 1.4 billion people in developing nations who live on less than \$1.25 a day. (2008 World Bank statistics on extreme poverty)

The truth is, we Americans have a problem with wealth, not unlike the rich man in our scripture. And you know what Jesus tells him. Jesus says his wealth is an obstacle to life with God.

This passage would go down easier if we could imagine the rich man as *one of them*, not one of us. A top-1% kind of guy with extra helicopters and yachts. Then we could discount what Jesus says.

But this man *is* one of us. He is privileged, just the way we are. And he is a sincere seeker. He's lived God's commandments faithfully but still hasn't found the peace he's looking for. So now he kneels before Jesus, humble, open, as eager as we are to do the right thing. He is one of us.

And Jesus, looking into his eager face, loves him. That's a powerful detail, especially in Mark's gospel which is far from sentimental. We're meant to understand that Jesus sees into this man's soul and loves him enough to tell him a hard truth. Which is a gift, because not many people will tell the truth to someone who is rich. Yet Jesus, looking at him, loves him and says,

“You lack one thing: go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor...; then come, follow me.”

The problem wasn't the possessions – it was this man's *attachment* to possessions. His wealth had come to define him. His wealth had actually become his god.

Martin Luther nailed the problem 500 years ago when he was explaining the First Commandment: *You shall have no other gods before me*. Luther wrote,

A god is that to which we look for good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in [it] with our whole heart... That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God... [And money] is the most common idol on earth. He who has money and property feels secure, happy, fearless, as if he were sitting in the middle of paradise. On the other hand, he who has nothing, doubts and despairs as if he never heard of God. (Luther on the First Commandment, in *The Large Catechism*)

The rich man's riches had become a substitute for God. He had placed his confidence in them, instead of in his Creator. So that this privileged and wealthy man, who looked as if he could lack nothing, actually lacked the most essential thing – radical dependence on God. What he lacked was the ability to take up his cross and follow Jesus. To lose his life in order to gain it. He lacked the will to surrender himself and come to Jesus free. And so he turned away, and Jesus let him go.

Jesus didn't send the man away. Jesus wanted him to receive the fullness of God's kingdom, to participate as completely as possible in God's saving love. And just as Jesus looked at him intently, lovingly – so Jesus looks at us, intently and lovingly, today.

In this disturbing passage, there is really nowhere to run to. Nowhere to hide. As a friend said, this passage can't be solved. It's intended to keep on agitating us. Nobody can read this passage and not be unsettled by it. And that is actually a gift, a loving gift from Christ.

Because we are the rich man. If it isn't money that's become our god, then maybe it's something else that has taken first place in our life. Something else that has come to define us. Something else that has become our security, in which we place our trust. What has become *your* God? Success, approval, pride, resentment, work, an addiction, an appetite, a relationship, your own ego, your own competence, your own plans? What is it that you cling to, that stands between you and complete and exclusive trust in God?

I hope we will not dismiss this passage as applying to someone else – someone richer or more obsessed than we believe we are. I also hope that we will not let Jesus' calling paralyze us in guilt or fear. Jesus is giving us a word we need.

He is calling us release those false securities and place our unreserved trust in God instead. We do not put our trust in what we have, do, or are. Instead, we place our trust in God, our Creator, our Savior. Nobody can be saved by their own riches or competence or plans or actions or self-sufficiency. We can only be saved by God's free and unearned love. Wealth doesn't save us. Poverty doesn't save us. Only God can save us. And surrendering our souls to God is what it's all about. It is what leads us into the fullest expression of life with God, which Jesus wanted for that rich man, and which Christ wants for us.

Jesus says, Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of heaven. For a person who "has it all" it's as hard as squeezing a camel through the eye of a needle! Ridiculous, in other words. It cannot be done. We cannot save ourselves, through wealth or power or good works or any other way.

"Then who can be saved?" we cry out with the disciples.

And scripture responds with a saying God's people often used, from Old Testament times onward: "For God all things are possible." It's a simple statement of faith. It puts the trust where trust belongs, with God. We cannot do this, but God can. And we trust God, all the way. "For God all things are possible."

Remember that Jesus looked upon that rich man kneeling before him, and loved him. Loved him as a precious child of God. Loved him and invited him into new life. Remember that Jesus never sent that man away. Jesus loved him first, and out of love he challenged him.

The love and the challenge always go together. When we kneel before Jesus, we receive first of all the love that cherishes us and embraces us and holds us fast. Love that makes us right with God. Love that covers our sins. Love that makes us new.

And, too, because Jesus loves us, we receive the challenge. The challenge to trust God alone, to “receive God’s kingdom like a little child.” The challenge to “lose our lives” in order to experience God’s life. The challenge to risk and trust and give away and let go, to put our wealth and possessions and aspirations in their proper place, under God’s love, so that with them we can share God’s love with a needful world.

In the love of Christ, we will keep on letting go, and we will keep on learning. “For with God all things are possible.”
Amen.