

**The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost ≅ Year B**  
**Saint Paul's Episcopal Church**  
**October 15, 2006**

*Go, Sell, Give, Come, Follow*

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**Lessons for the Day**

- ✘ Psalm 90:1-8, 12
- ✘ Amos 5:6-7,10-15
- ✘ Hebrews 3:1-6
- ✘ Mark 10:17-27 (28-31)

**Homily**

I greet you in the name of **God our Creator, Christ our Brother**, and the **Holy Spirit** who sustains and sanctifies us, empowering us to love and to serve both God and Christ.

**Amen.**

A good friend of mine is a Presbyterian clergywoman in Albemarle, NC. She once commented that "it is a good idea to preach from the lectionary because this keeps you from preaching only your favorite parts of the Bible." I am not sure many of us would name today's readings as among our favorites:

In **Amos** we are enjoined to "seek the Lord and live" else the Lord will "break out against the house of Joseph like a fire . . . "

Amos 5:6a (NRSV)

In **Psalms 90**, the psalmist reminds us that "we are consumed by (God's) anger; by (God's) wrath we are overwhelmed . . . "

Psalm 90:7 (NRSV)

And in the **Gospel reading from Mark** we get to once again encounter the *rich young ruler* and that whole song and dance about selling what you have and giving to the poor, then going and following Jesus.

Mark 10: 17-27 (NRSV)

Actually, "rich young ruler" is a conflation of the three synoptic gospels: only **Matthew says he was young**; only **Luke says he was a ruler**. But they are **unanimous on this: the dude was rich**. And it is this -- his richness -- that causes us all to squirm.

A quick re-cap: Jesus is setting out on a journey and a young man rushes up to him, schmoozes him up with a little "good teacher" language, and then asks Jesus what is necessary to inherit eternal life. After a brief reminder that only God is good, Jesus recounts for the man the last six of the Ten Commandments -- all of the ones having to do with how we humans relate to each other.

"Gotcha," says the man. "Piece of Cake. 'Been doin' all that since I was a little tyke."

And Jesus looks at the man and he loves him -- celebrating the man's earnestness and his devotion. And then Jesus speaks again:

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

Mark 10: 21b (NRSV)

Hear it again: **Go, Sell, Give**, then **Come, Follow**. This text is *not mostly about selling*, this text is *mostly about following*. Yet we (and I am talking about *me* here) are so afraid to **sell** and to **give** that we never even get around to thinking about the "**come and follow**" parts of this gospel.

The **young man** who has entreated Jesus **now knows what eternal life requires**. And the text tells us that "he is shocked and he goes away grieving, for he has many possessions". (Mark 10:22b NRSV paraphrased)

This story that we have come to know as the Rich Young Ruler is **unique in all the gospels**: it is the **only story in the Gospel where someone refuses a call to follow Christ**. And the stumbling block is not right living -- for the young man reports himself to have been living right since his youth.

No, **the stumbling block is "stuff"** -- riches -- and the young man "goes away grieving". Then Jesus continues by telling us that "**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.**"

Whoa now!

We are **not the first people to wrestle with this passage**. In fact, the passage causes so much discomfort that **the last portion has been off-tortured** -- trying to ease the discomfort index of the listeners. You may have heard that this portion of the text refers to a small door (the needle's eye) in the Jerusalem City Gate.

So that -- while it would be difficult to get a camel through this passage in the gate -- it would be **orders of magnitude easier than putting a real camel through the eye of a real needle** *and maybe we rich people have a chance after all!*

**Good luck**. This is a torturing of the Gospel that didn't appear until some seven hundred years after the death of Christ. Seems this passage caused discomfort among eighth century Christians as well!

**Still yet there's hope** -- in the original languages the word for "camel" and the word for "rope" are evidently quite similar. Perhaps you have heard this passage interpreted as, "**It is easier for a rope to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven**". It's still an unlikely image, but not nearly so impossible as getting that ole dromedary through the eye of that needle.

Why is it that people -- and by "people" I mean *me* here -- will go to such great lengths to misinterpret a simple statement?

**Seems we are stuck with this passage.** And Jesus caps the story by pointing us -- simultaneously -- to the source of all our frailty and also all our strength and hope. The disciples ask Jesus who can be saved, and Jesus replies "For mortals (being saved) is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." (Mark 10:26 NRSV paraphrased)

**This passage begs the question: What does it mean to follow Jesus in the way Jesus is asking us to follow him?** The Gospel of Mark -- thought by some to be the most reliable of the Gospel accounts because it was written earliest -- **presents a picture of radical faith and obedience to God.** And it begs the question: what does radical obedience look like?

Consider this: only a handful of verses before today's passage we meet this delightful passage:

"If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off . . . if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off . . . if your eye causes you to stumble tear it out; it is better to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell . . . "

(Portions of Mark 9:43 - 47 NRSV)

This is hardly the domesticated, "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" to which we have become accustomed → and **with whom we have become comfortable!** Quite frankly, this is a very uncomfortable Jesus, at least for me!

**So what can we learn from this?** What might this story of the Rich Young Ruler mean to us here and now, many of us having left our homes and a fair amount of riches to be here this morning, seeking nothing more than to learn more about God, to participate in the Eucharist, to learn to walk in love as Christ loved us?

What do we do about our riches? (And our hands, our feet, and our eyes, for that matter?)

Remember this -- even in the hard portions -- the **Gospel** (and all of the Bible) **is one big, sprawling love story.** It is the story of a **God who creates** and a **God who loves.** **A God who comes** and walks among us, and a **God who dies** for us. **And a God who** -- in the waters of Baptism -- **dwells within us to conform us to the very image of Christ.**

And these stories -- both the Rich Young Ruler and the cutting off of limbs -- are all about our participation in -- our cooperation with -- God's love.

The question -- broadly put -- is this: **What do you love more than you love God?** What do you love so much that it is an impediment to the Holy Spirit's ongoing work of transforming you into the very image of Christ?

I once heard someone say:

**"Show me the thing** that -- if you lost it -- would destroy your faith in God -- and **I will show you your true God."**

It **could** be **money**. And it **could** be **power**. Or **beauty**. Or **prestige**. Or **talent**. Or any combination of these bewitching riches that whisper to us that God is not enough, not to be trusted, not who God's long, sprawling love story tells us God is.

The call is to get rid of **anything** that blocks you from a total and utter dependence on God.

What is it that -- if you lost it -- would destroy your faith in God?

Think on this.

Having discovered your true God, go -- give up this thing that you have substituted for God, receive your treasure in heaven -- then come and follow Jesus.

"For mortals (being saved) is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

(Mark 10:26 NRSV paraphrased)

**Amen.**