

Today’s gospel lesson is a story filled with subtleties; words and phrases tossed in by the writer to enhance the story, but which are often glossed over when the story is read or told. As I spoke about this story this past Tuesday during our regular Tuesday afternoon Bible Study I found myself constantly correcting myself as I wanted to call the man who accosted Jesus the “Rich Young Ruler”. If we look carefully, Mark says nothing about the man being young, not about him being a ruler. My stumbling stems from the fact that this story is found in all three Synoptic Gospels. It is Matthew who calls the man “young”. It is Luke who calls the man a “ruler”. Many like me have therefore melded the three descriptions into one. The man described in Mark only as rich therefore becomes rich and young and a ruler!

Now to the subtleties. We are told that the man ran up to Jesus, denoting a sense of urgency in his demeanor. The man’s request was to know how to inherit eternal life, probably the only way that this man was accustomed acquiring anything. He had no concept of earning or achieving eternal life, only the concept of inheritance. When the man claimed that he had observed the laws of Moses since youth, I get the distinct feeling that he was not bragging, but rather that his urgency has increased; that his insecurity has not diminished one bit. And when Jesus looked upon the man, he did not look in disgust or anger or shame, but rather with love. It was with compassion and care that Jesus saw the insecurity and desperation that drove the man. Jesus knew, as the man himself knew, that his life was not complete.

Jesus then offered the man a series of imperatives, “Go – Sell – Give – Come – Follow”. Jesus knew very well what troubled the man even if the man himself could not see that point. The man had become wedded to his possessions. Jesus was offering the man freedom; freedom from the tyranny of his “stuff”, his things, his wealth, by suggesting that he simply give it all away and become a disciple.

And the poor man (and by that I mean rich in things but poor in spirit) the poor man reeled as if struck physically by the wisdom of Jesus’ words and left in deep grief as Jesus, I would guess, knew that he would. Jesus had struck at the heart of the man’s inner soul, a soul that had been given over to that which he owned; that which had now come to own him.

My own denomination came out with a very poignant poster for one of its stewardship campaigns long ago. The caption on the poster was, “Whatever you cannot afford to give up owns you.” Think about that a bit, “Whatever you cannot afford to give up owns you.” Our possessions have the ability to run our lives and will cause us to do things that are good, bad and just plain ugly in order to retain them. And the dearer those possessions are to us, the more power they exert upon us.

Jesus knew this. It is at base of his proclamation to the people following the encounter with the rich man (who may have been young and who may have been a ruler). “How hard it will be, said Jesus, for those of wealth to enter God’s Kingdom!” And by way, that old tale about the eye of the needle being a very small gate into the city of Jerusalem is indeed nothing more than an old tale. It is and was a story that popped up at least 800 years after the time of Christ and is totally unsubstantiated. There is not, nor has there ever been a gate in Jerusalem’s city wall called the “Needle’s Eye”. No, Jesus’ extreme allusion was offered for exactly what it was meant to be, an impossibility. Jesus stated that immediately in response to his disciples’ incredulous question, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus said plainly, “For mortals it is impossible.” Jesus did not say “difficult”. He did not say “really-really hard”. “Impossible” was the word. And we as followers of Jesus Christ should not be trying to sugar coat it, softening it so as to make it more palatable in any way.

Friends, this story in the Gospel of Mark, just like the accompanying passage from the book of Amos, is not a polemic against the rich. Its message is not that it is sinful to be wealthy. Good news for this day is that wealthy people can achieve the Kingdom of God just like the poor. The story is a polemic against our reliance upon wealth and the fact that we become wedded to our possessions so that our possessions do indeed begin to possess us.

A modern day fable. This is a true story from my younger years: Her name was Adelheid Luhr. Most people knew her Audie. She was probably the first millionaire that I ever knew or that I was at least ever aware of. I was a lowly seminary student who had been engaged in an intern year of service in the midst of my seminary education. Audie was a member of the church that I was serving during that intern year. Her husband and his brother had returned from WWII and began a small heavy construction business in western Illinois which, over the years, had grown into a huge operation that is still active today. Audie found that wealth did not necessarily lead to bliss as her husband died at a relatively young age along with his good friend and personal pilot as their small plane went down in Alaska as they were heading there to hunt bears.

Audie stepped in and took her husband’s place in the company and continued to run the operation with her brother-in-law. For me, Audie was a prime example of what the rich man of our story today was not. She was definitely not owned by her possessions, even though she had a lot of possessions. She admired beautiful things and had a lot of beautiful things. But I always had the feeling that she would be glad to give those beautiful things away to anyone who admired them as she did. She lived comfortably but modestly for a woman of her means. And Audie was generous; unbelievably generous. The seminary that I attended has on its campus the Luhr library named after Audie’s late husband. (She never attached her own name to anything.) The local Children’s home run by our denomination has many upgrades to its campus as result of her gifts. Local schools and churches and libraries and a host of organizations that gave hope to those who had no hope benefitted from her and from the fact that Audie knew that all the money in the world not secure the return of the one thing that she had loved the most, the husband that was lost to her.

Friends, today is the official kickoff of Zion's stewardship drive for the 2019 calendar year. This is a time when we ask our members to make pledges of financial support to the church. If you have not already received a letter and pledge card from the church, watch your mail for that letter. It should come within the next few days. If you haven't received a letter by the end of the week, please contact us. We ask that you prayerfully consider the amount of support that you can pledge to the congregation for the coming year. We also understand that there are life-changes for all us that can come upon us without warning and ask that you let us know throughout year if those life-changes will affect your level pledge by lowering it or possibly even raising it!

As most of you know, the church's budget each year is built upon these pledges, so we need to know one way or another whether you can support church with your financial gifts. We even need to know if you cannot support the church financially at all. So please get those pledge cards back to us as soon as possible. Jesus said to the people, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth (and friends no matter how you slice it, on a global scale, we are all pretty wealthy) to enter the Kingdom of God" "For mortals it is, said Jesus, impossible."

But (and here's the take away for this morning) "But not for God. For God all things are possible." Let us strive to break the hold that our possessions have upon us. Let us turn to God and rest in God's grace knowing with joy in our hearts that for God all things are possible.

Amen.