

Amos 5:6-7,10-15, Psalm 90:12-17, Hebrews 4:12-16, Mark 10:17-30

“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.’ When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”

I’m not sure why I love the story of the rich young man. It is a challenging story. It’s full of difficult teachings from Jesus. Teachings I don’t live up to! And yet I do love this story. When I hear it, I feel my “heart burn within me” and it fills me with a deep sense of longing.

What am I longing for? I think this story feels to me like an invitation that I want to accept. I want to be there in that moment, 2000 years ago, kneeling at Jesus’ feet and being invited to be one of his disciples. “Come, follow me” – those are the words he spoke to the Twelve! This young man is being invited to join, perhaps not the Twelve, but the inner circle of Jesus’ followers.

And today, living in this present time, I want to accept that invitation, too. Jesus’ words, “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me,” feel to me like a very *appealing* invitation into a life of simplicity.

I want to be a *disciple*. I want to have a single-minded focus on Jesus, like St. Mark’s gospel is constantly calling us to. I want to be free from the distractions and cares and worries of daily life that draw my thoughts and my energy and my time away from the love of God. I feel like such a simple life as a disciple would make me better able to really love my neighbor, to love my family, and to love God.

Jesus’ invitation in this passage has been heard and accepted before – by many people. It has been radically accepted by many – from St. Anthony of Egypt in the 3rd century, who sold all his possessions and became a hermit in the desert, to St. Francis of Assisi, whom we celebrated last week.

When St. Francis heard this Gospel passage read, he went home and began selling his family’s possessions – including their stock as cloth merchants – and giving the money to the poor. His father, in panic and fear and anger, demanded before the bishop that his son pay back the money he so recklessly gave away. And Francis famously gave his father everything he had left – including every stitch of clothing he had on, and stood naked in the center of the town square.

And with his load thus lightened, (and after someone gave him some clothes) Francis was able to go out, and preach, and love the sick, and share the meager resources he begged with the poor, with an incredible lightness of heart. He was famous for his remarkable joyfulness – and this is something that saints in general are notable for. Joy. Casting away the weight of possessions, and anxieties, and distractions seems to make them float – burst up to the surface – and radiate lightness and joy.

Any of us here who have ever felt drawn to monastic life, or to a life of radical community service, perhaps in a foreign land, have glimpsed the appeal of renunciation, and of the freedom and single-minded focus that renunciation offers.

And that is a call we could answer. Many have answered it. We could go today, and sell our possessions, and quit our jobs, and join a Christian community, a monastery, or service organization of some sort, and give our lives, radically and unreservedly, to the service of God and the service of the poor. We could!

And yet, many of us – most of us – won't. And we will have many reasons – including good reasons – why we won't.

And one possible reason is love. Many of us have loved ones, often family members, who are dependent upon us. Who need our presence, who need our financial support, whom we can't abandon. "Honor your mother and father," Jesus said in verse 19 of today's passage. He does not condone abandoning our obligations to family members who need us, and condemns it elsewhere in the Gospel (Mark 7:11-13).

But it is *very tempting* to read this passage today and keep finding ways out. I don't want to do that. It's very tempting to point to the ways we can use wealth for good, and thus explain why we pursue a high paying job and maintain our wealth instead of living in poverty. It's very tempting to think of reasons we can't leave the life we have to go off and live the kind of dramatically self-sacrificial life that we read books and articles and watch movies about.

And a side-benefit of those reasonable explanations for why we can't follow Jesus' invitation *so literally*, is that we get to keep our comfortable life. We get to keep things we like. We get to benefit from being respectable – and not having our friends think we've lost our minds. We get to have a little disposable income on the side – to go out for nice meals, and travel, and buy things we like.

So instead of giving any more reasonable explanations – which already exist and are not always without merit, I'd like to end by taking a little time to sit with the discomfort of Jesus' challenge.

"How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God." And we all have wealth. Even if you are the poorest of your friends, even if you are the poorest person in the room right now, you have wealth beyond the understanding of millions of people on earth today.

And maybe that comparison isn't entirely helpful. Feeling guilty that others are worse off than us isn't entirely productive, though it might motivate us to do more to help others.

But the wealth we have, even if it feels like a small wealth, is a distraction. We all worry about money. It's one of the very top things that families fight over. It's one of the very top things that humans hurt each other over. Wealth can be a useful tool, and the pursuit of sufficient resources for our livelihood is a basic human need. But it is very, very distracting.

So think about your own wealth. Think about the ways that money or the pursuit of money distracts and consumes you.

Let's think about the ways we use our money. The worthwhile things we spend it on, and the things we use it for that we could have done without.

Let's think about how much we could give for the poor. How much we could give for providing resources or funding programs that help people have shelter, and food, and education, and love. How much we don't give, because we've spent it on other things. Or are saving it for later. And in the meantime, our brothers and sisters, around the world and in our neighborhood, are suffering.

The best way to deal with that, to lessen human suffering and to help those in need, is not an obvious, simple answer. It's a subject of endless debate between individuals, between political parties. But this question should haunt us.

It is a fact that the money we spend on ourselves could serve others. It is unfortunately true that here at Grace Church, where outreach and mission to our local community and to the world are a huge part of our budget,

when we have a budget shortfall (as we do now) that section of the budget gets cut, too, and those who need us are forced to do without.

Feeling guilty isn't productive in itself. But feeling motivated to change the way we live, and the way we give, could change a life. It could save a life.

And may well change our own lives. It might make us freer. It might make us less weighed down by distractions, and possessions, and guilt. It might make our hearts lighter, with more room in them for joy.

Here's one little example. And I really hope that even though this is an example from my own life you won't think I'm making too much of myself, because I struggle a lot with how I relate to money.

But when I started working here, I used to drive every single day through the intersection of South Glebe and Mount Vernon, and there was almost always someone begging for money there. And it made me uncomfortable. And it made me feel guilty and wonder if I should give something. And it made me think of all the reasons and arguments against giving to panhandlers.

And it made me wonder if I was really just using those arguments as an excuse for myself. And it made me resent the people begging because I didn't want to think that was true about myself, but I was afraid it was. And it made me not even want to look at them, and to avoid eye contact at all cost. And it made me hate it every time I went through that intersection.

And I just got fed up with the weight of all that. So I got a bunch of one dollar bills. And I said to myself, if I'm at an intersection and someone is begging, and the light is red and there's time for them to get to me, I'm going to give a dollar. Didn't end up costing more than \$5 in any week, usually less – one Starbucks coffee.

And that decision just inverted my heart. I can't even explain how happy it made me to just give someone a dollar. Maybe they didn't need it. But maybe it helped them get a good meal that day. And it made me a lot happier, because I didn't beat myself up or worry about what I should do. And sometimes people were so grateful it made me want to cry. And I could look them in the eye. Once I made the decision and stopped worrying about what to do every time, it was just a joyful, light, easy thing. I don't usually get that much joy out of one dollar.

I'm not saying you should do what I did in that case. There are other, probably better, ways you could give. But I will say that it really made me see how much worrying about how to spend one dollar had been consuming me, and making me angry, and making me feel guilty, and getting in the way of my relationships with other people, and my relationship with God.

“How hard it is [for all of us] to enter the kingdom of God.” How hard to look at the world as God looks, to love as God loves, to give as God gives. But remember what Jesus said when his disciples were shocked by his words in today's passage and asked if anyone could be saved.

Jesus said, “For mortals it is impossible. But not for God. For God, all things are possible.” Just like the rich young man, when Jesus looks on you, he loves you. And he invites you to feel his love, to believe in his love. To share his joy.

So look to your heart, feel the challenge of God's words, and know that his invitation today is full of hope, and joy, and love.