

“Offering Freely”

Jesus was first known as an amazing teacher, a Rabbi. No one had ever taught, ever spoken like Jesus. We see this in the Gospel stories beginning when he was twelve years old in the Temple in Jerusalem. As an adult he comes to his hometown, Nazareth, and teaches in the synagogue. Eventually, twelve disciples follow him because of his teaching. And crowds flock to hear him, see him, meet him, even just to touch him.

Today’s story of the rich man begins as he runs up to Jesus and kneels before him. He knows Jesus’ reputation and so he addresses him, “Good Teacher...” He asks Jesus about the meaning of life, the meaning of eternity. “What must I do?” The man has followed all the commandments yet, as we soon find out, he seems to trust more in his wealth than in God. He can’t let go of his wealth to follow Jesus.

Jesus often teaches, answers questions, with very clear, practical advice, as in today’s story. Sometimes he answers questions by asking the questioner a question. He uses parables and stories. Often his teaching seems hard to understand, hard to accept. The man in today’s story goes away shocked and sad. Jesus uses this as an example of how those who are rich may find it difficult to enter God’s kingdom.

Those who heard this were astounded. If the rich cannot be saved, who can? Personal wealth and possessions were normally seen as a blessing from God, a sign of divine favor. Our world is built upon a system of financial reward. We all know the need for security.

Jesus is not saying that it will be impossible for those financially well-off and secure to enter God’s kingdom. He is saying that it will be hard – for two reasons. First, to enter God’s kingdom depends upon trusting in God. Immediately before this story in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus has blessed children and told his disciples “Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of Heaven like a child shall not enter it.” Children need to trust.

Those with wealth sometimes trust in their wealth, and their own ability to gain wealth and power. This leads to the second difficulty. Those who know God’s kingdom find their identity in God. They are children of God. They are stewards of all that God has provided. Those who are wealthy take their identity from their wealth, their security, their power and status.

Wealth can be a blessing if it is used, shared, given away to help the needy, to provide for God’s Church, to help educate, to establish justice, to hate evil and do good as the prophet Amos reminds us.

Ultimately, how we use our financial resources defines who we are. What I do with my time, my talent, my treasure forms me as a child of God or as a child of the world.

Jesus asked the man in today’s story to offer freely his wealth to help others. The man couldn’t do it. Jesus invites us to be generous givers of all that we have, to help others. That is why our outreach and stewardship ministries are so vital at Grace Church. More than ten percent of our annual budget is given away, spent beyond Grace Church. In addition, thousands of dollars are given for our feeding programs and Food Pantry, for the Haiti Micah Project, for the J2A pilgrimages and Thanksgiving baskets. We are a generous parish and we always want to do more.

In the weeks ahead, we will be asked to support our school and our parish. In three weeks, on All Saints Sunday, we're asked to offer our pledges for 2019. Our work depends upon the financial gifts of all of our people who offer freely from their financial resources.

Ultimately, all of Jesus' teachings are a prelude to what occurred on the night before he was arrested and on the morning that he was crucified. Jesus' Passion and Glory are his final offering, freely given. His offerings of his life and his love, his truth and his grace, make all our giving possible.