

“Getting Past the Roadblocks
to a Closer Walk with God”
Pentecost 19/Proper 23B
“For God all things are possible.”

The main character of today’s gospel is a man we would call a good guy. He has good intentions and is sincere in his approach to achieving a closer walk with the Lord. He is serious about his mission to be a more spiritual person. No wonder that he seizes this opportunity to spend time with a spiritual giant named Jesus of Nazareth. He runs up and kneels before the Master. He is polite and addresses Jesus with the utmost respect. He appears to ask the right questions. It is said Jesus loved him.

The question that this man asks of Jesus is key to his motivation. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” It is a fascinating question simply because in 2006 it is one question most people don’t ask. We live in an age of “don’t ask, don’t who tell.” But there are some nagging questions in the hearts of people that don’t go away.

One of those questions is eternity. As I have said before, eternity is in the hands of God. People who worry about such things either don’t have faith trusting Jesus to save them for eternity or they believe there is neither an after life nor a judgment day. The man’s question implies there is something he must do to enter eternal life. Notice how puzzling the language is in his question. Inheritance implies a gift left by a benefactor to a beneficiary. Yet in asking what he must do the man suggests he has to be active and merit this gift of eternal life. Yet inheritance in Jewish law was based on one’s birth and the relationship one had to the giver.

Jesus addresses this man’s concerns about his earthly inheritance. He reminds the man that it was inappropriate to address him as “good” when according to Jewish teaching that term was reserved only for God. In stating that the man knew the commandments Jesus directs his attention not to the first half of the Decalogue but the second half that deals with human relationships. These relational laws suggest that obedience to God's commandments is expressed by the ability to live in harmony and justice with one's neighbor.

The man who kneels at his feet is obviously focused on human abilities ("what must I do") and capabilities (being a "good" teacher). Jesus instead redirects the focus of the man's quest by declaring the

goodness of God and the righteousness of the commandments.

At first the young man is delighted with Jesus' words. He feels confident he has kept all these commandments "since my youth" (v.20). Mark's gospel, unlike Matthew's and Luke's, now reveals that Jesus responds to this unthinking exuberance not with anger or ridicule, but with love: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him"(v.21). It is out of love, not out of some decision to squelch an ego or make an example, that Jesus reveals what is lacking in this seeker's life. Out of genuine compassion, Jesus swiftly identifies the roadblock to this man's relationship with God, an overweening attachment to what can only be called "stuff."

Jesus' command not only shocks the questioner; it stuns the normative standards of first-century Judaism. While there was no scriptural prohibition to keep the pious from giving away all personal belongings, scribal legislation restricted almsgiving to one-fifth of one's personal property (Kethubim 50a). This insured that the pious giver would not be reduced to poverty -- thus becoming another candidate for charity himself.

Jesus' suggestion that the man impoverish himself also flies in the face of the common understanding that possessing wealth was a sign of divine favor.

Jesus' command made clear that nothing less than a complete commitment to God and God alone will enable a believer to lay up "treasure in heaven." Indeed we must not, like the questioner himself, be so amazed at Jesus' demand that we miss the second (and most crucial) part of Jesus' command: "then come, follow me" (v.21).

The search for eternal life is found only in discipleship with Jesus. As Mark catalogs the man's response, he reveals for the first time the economic status of this individual: He had "many possessions." Jesus' demand leaves this wealthy man "shocked." Other translations render it "his face fell." Jesus' command zeroed in on this man's exclusive source of well-being. His most important sense of self came from the status, power and security vast resources afforded him.

The man's failure to follow through on Jesus' final demand reveals that his confessed observance of the Law was governed more by possessions and position than by a thirst for righteousness. When Jesus listed the commandments for this man in verse 19, he subtly altered the list. "You shall not defraud" or "rob" is a fairly

unique interpretation of the tenth commandment prohibiting covetousness. For a man of many possessions or much land (the more usual translation of "great wealth"), to defraud was more tempting than to covet.

Before his reaction of shock, the man heard Jesus invitation "to give it all away." Jesus was making a statement that would address all who heard him speak to the rich man. The response of the disciples to "the eye of a needle" comparison Jesus made between the wealthy and the kingdom of God revealed that all of them were in shock. "Who then can be saved?" tell us that most of us fall when trust in status, power and personal security put to the question.

These roadblocks to intimacy with God are common ground for us as well. What I hear God saying today is that something happens to a person's faith when they are willing to "give it all away." When we are willing to put our whole being in God's hands trusting him to meet our vital needs the kingdom of God becomes near. When as God's children nothing is permitted to come between us and our inheritance then we are set free from the heartache of trying to earn our way into God's kingdom.

God has called us to an inheritance that can not be bought. I hope that none of us not even for a New York minute, believes that eternal life can be won by what we give, what we do, or what we say. We must consider that we may keep all the things and perform all those things we were taught to do from our youth but fall short of the kingdom of God. What one thing is it that you lack in your relationship with God? Consider what that might be. It may just be the one thing that inhibits you in your faith and intimacy with our Lord.

Since 1984, Leadership Network has fostered church innovation and growth by offering strategies to *identify, connect and help high-capacity Christian leaders multiply their impact*. Leadership Network serves as a resource broker that supplies information to and connects leaders of innovative churches. Bob Buford, founder of the Leadership Network, wrote *Halftime and Game Plan*, books that came out of his mind and heart on how to find meaning and fulfillment in the second half of our lives, and a third book, *Stuck in Halftime: Reinvesting Your One and Only Life*, was released in April 2001. His whole philosophy of giving comes with one line: "I want to bounce my last check." Buford believes that responding gleefully to Jesus' reminder that we aren't taking it with us, should help us decide where it's going. He believes that dying penniless is the point, not the

problem. To Buford, who along with his other numerous gifts also matches the total contributions of his employees to local churches, "bouncing his last check" symbolizes that he has successfully passed along all the good gifts he has received from God.

How can we live lives that "give it all away?" That is the question I leave you with this morning. I can't answer that for you and know one else should. My prayer for each of us is this: "Lord, may nothing come between me and thee. May neither things present nor things to come keep me from living gratefully for the inheritance that you have left for me." Amen