**20 Pentecost**

**October 11, 2015**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit**

**Amen.**

How would you respond to the mandate to sell everything that you own in exchange for “eternal life” … whatever that is? For that matter, what is your most prized possession? Do you own it or does it own you? With everything that you have, what is missing in your life that might make your life feel complete?

In today’s reading from Mark’s gospel Jesus is on the road with his disciples. This means he is not at a synagogue, or in someone’s home, or just standing on a hill teaching. He is on a journey … he is walking with his disciples … when he encounters a man. From the words of the story we can surmise that this is not a causal encounter. The man comes “running” up to Jesus. He falls on the ground and “kneels” before him. This sounds to me like someone who is very intentional. This sounds to me as if it was not something motivated by a mere impulsive curiosity. It sounds to me like this man may have been bordering on desperation. This man is intentional about finding Jesus and he is intentional about asking Jesus this question. It is as if his life depended upon it.

I believe that the man’s question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" is a question about what this person needs to do to be a part of the realm of God with its unending blessing. This man is not asking about going to heaven. He wants to know about participating in the realm of God … now! This man is not talking about living forever. He is talking about living in the fullness of image of God … beginning in the present moment.

*The man asked Jesus, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus then said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'” He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." 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. (Mark 10:18-22)*

We learn a couple of things about this man. First he is a righteous person who has kept the commandments since he was young. Secondly, we learn that he has many possessions. We also learn something fascinating about Jesus. This is one of the few instances in the synoptic gospels when we hear that Jesus “loved” someone … and the one he loved was a complete stranger. So, when Jesus looked at this man, what was it he saw that evoked this love? Jesus looked at the man, and loved him. Jesus said, “You lack one thing.” And then, out of that love, Jesus tells the man to do something that the man find “shocking.” “Sell what you own, and give to the poor.”

What was it that this man lacked? Charity? Possibly. But I can’t imagine that a man who had kept all the commandments since his youth would lack charity. My guess is that what this man lacks is deeper than mere charity. I think it is trust. Trust in God to provide what this man both needs and wants. My guess is that this man’s many possessions owned the man rather than the man owning his possessions. By that I mean that this man’s sense of who he was … in the eyes of the world and in the eyes of God … were dependent upon what he possessed … tangible possessions and intangible possessions, including his “righteousness.”

And yet that wasn’t enough. There is a piece of this story that goes unsaid. What was this man’s life like before he came running after Jesus? What drove this man to throw himself down in front of Jesus to ask this question? He had many tangible possessions. He was a good person … he lived a righteous life. So what was missing? What we do know is that this man’s life was incomplete … and he knew it. His self awareness of the fact that something was missing is a key piece of this transaction. Maybe he left his encounter with Jesus “grieving” because he had been ordered to sell all he had, which was a lot. But at least he knew what was missing in his life, and he knew what the prescription was to fill it. Woe be unto those who are not even aware that something is missing in their life.

So, what is it that is missing in your life? What is it that you possess that would be so hard to relinquish that you might leave such an encounter “grieving?” Are you even aware that there is something missing in your life in spite of being a “good person” and living a “good” life and possessing much? And what about those possessions? I’m not just talking about tangible, material possessions … clothes, iPads, and plasma TV’s, and cars, and houses, and stock portfolios, and retirement accounts. I’m also talking about the intangibles. I’m talking about possessing status, and reputation, and prestige, and position, and degrees, and title. I’m talking about owning a self-image, and owning others projections upon you. I’m talking about owning that you are a “good” person.

I’m talking about ego and the way in which all these intangibles ending up owning us, rather than just be a part of who we are. Like the man in the story with Jesus we let possessions … tangible and intangible … define us, and when that happens we find it very difficult to give them up. What might happen to us if we were to relinquish what others think of us, and just be who we are? Can we trust God to love us regardless? A friend of mine wrote a book titled “What you Think of Me is None of My Business.” Are you ready to live your life that way?

I find it interesting that we are left hanging at the end of this story. The man went away grieving. But what happened then? I find it hard to believe that a person so driven to pursue this question about living in God’s realm of unending blessing would just give up the chase. Whatever was incomplete in his life remained incomplete, and he is profoundly aware of it. What we do know is that Jesus let’s him go.

Every so often someone will come to me in my office and tell me a similar story. They feel they are missing something in their life. Usually it is in mid-life. They have followed a path of least resistance in their jobs, and often in their relationships. They found they were good at something and so they followed it as a career, even if their passion lay elsewhere. Or they had no idea what they wanted to do in life and an opportunity just came along and they followed it into a dead end. After years of being a “good” person, going to work every day, leading a solid family life, and accumulating all the stuff of life … material and otherwise … they look around and realize that something is missing. The marriage or relationship that looked so perfect when they entered it never lived up to their expectations. The job that they have learned to do well and offers good financial security is recognized as being unfulfilling … and they are left with an emptiness in their soul and spirit.

Sometimes, in an attempt to fill the hole they react in inappropriate ways … they have an affair, or an addiction takes over, or they acquire more stuff … and more toys … until the closets and the garage are overfull. But these pursuits never satisfy the deep hole that keeps growing in their psyche and heart and soul. I imagine there are some people who have never had an awareness of such a missing part. And I am sure that there are those who live life in the fullest of God’s image and may not lack for anything. But they are not the ones who come to see me in my office.

I have found that at least part of the prescription for filling that void is found in this story. No, it isn’t to go and sell everything one has and give it to the poor. But it is about undoing the power that one’s possessions … tangible and intangible … have on you. It is about trusting that in that place of being so unsure about who you really are … especially once dispossessed of what has previously define you … that even in that place it is about trusting that God loves you, just as Jesus loved this stranger. It is about seeing one’s self as God sees us, and relinquishing that image that we have worked for so long to nurture. And it may mean walking away many times … walking away grieving many times … before being able to trust enough to sell all you have.

This is a story that I relate to in a personal way. My father was a pilot in the Pacific during WWII. He was one of the first to be discharged from the Navy and therefore had the pick of jobs when he returned to the States. He took a sales position with DuPont selling synthetic textile fibers to mills in New England … and it was a booming business. Most of the time we lived around New York City, but for a few years we lived in North Carolina because of the textile industry there.

My father eventually became the Executive Marketing Manager for textile fibers in the entire northeast. One day he met in war buddy on the commuter train and the friend was taking art classes at the Art Student League in New York. During the war my father was one of those who painted half-naked women on the front of airplanes … he had a talent … and soon he was taking classes at the art Students League as well.

Long story made short … after 18 years working with DuPont, with six children … the oldest two, me and my brother Kirk, in college … my father resigned to become a starving artist on the coast of North Carolina. He knew he was missing something in his life. He was not following his passion. He may not have sold everything he had, but he certainly sold his security, his position, his prestige and more. And he trusted God.

His story informed my own story. If my father could do what he did, then I could leave a career of academia and follow my spirit into the ministry. No I didn’t sell everything … almost everything, but not everything. And I trusted God. Sometimes I wasn’t so sure it was the best thing to do, but in the end I trusted God.

I have found that at least part of the prescription for filling that missing part of life is found in this story about Jesus and the rich man. No, it isn’t just about selling everything one has and giving it to the poor. But it is about undoing the power that one’s possessions … tangible and intangible … have on you. It is about trusting that in that place of being so unsure about who you really are … especially once dispossessed of what has previously define you … that even in that place it is about trusting that God loves you, just as Jesus loved this stranger. It is about seeing one’s self as God sees us, and relinquishing that image that we have worked for so long to nurture. And it may mean walking away many times … walking away grieving many times … before being able to trust enough to sell all you have.

Did this story ever really happen? I don’t know, but just because it didn’t happen doesn’t mean it isn’t true. And this is not about what happen 2,000 year ago. It is about how I know this story to be true in our life today.

Amen.