

**21 Pentecost
October 14, 2018**

**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.**

The utter devastation in the Florida Panhandle from Hurricane Michael is hard to comprehend. Where houses once stood there is nothing but some pilings in the ground, or a slab of concrete. Everything is gone. In Mexico City the mayor estimated that 95% of the structures in his town were destroyed. And we are just now hearing of the number of deaths of those who had not evacuated and were caught in the collapse of the shelters around them.

When Hurricane Matthew hit St. Augustine in 2016, and Hurricane Irma last year, almost all of the damage was from flooding ... the structures remained even if they had to be completely gutted and rebuilt. Visually, the damage was very different than we see from Hurricane Michael, but in many respects the consequences to individuals and families is the same ... they have to start over. They have nothing. Maybe a few important papers and photographs they grabbed as they evacuated, but that is about it.

Understandably, most of the people, upon seeing the for the first time the destruction of their house, are shocked and grieved. We see it on the news when families return to the site of what was once their home and find nothing. And it happens not just after a Hurricane like Michael, but after a wildfire in California, or a tornado in Kansas. However ... and this is where I believe this tragedy of Hurricane Michael relates to our Gospel reading this morning ... there are those who see their total loss as an opportunity.

I saw a TV interview with a man who had lost his home to a forest fire in Oregon. He said, "I've lost everything I owned ... my house, my car, my boat, my bed ... everything. But I'm not so sure if I owned them or they owned me. Now that they are gone I can go anywhere I want to go, and I can be anyone I want to be. It is as if the fire freed me from myself."

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.

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. Jesus told him to sell all he had and give it to the poor. 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 has something to do with 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 ... and one of his intangible possessions was his so-called "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.

It is very different when someone loses everything from a natural disaster, and when someone makes a conscious choice to give up what they own, yet there are some pieces that connect the two experiences.

The question I have is, “How do I know this story to be true for me ... for us ... today?” So, what is it that you may lack? What is it that you may possess that would be so hard to relinquish that you might leave such an encounter “grieving?” If you lost everything to a hurricane, or fire, or other disaster, what would you grieve the most?

A number of people in this congregation did lose everything in Hurricane Matthew two years ago. Their houses were flooded, and although they were still standing they had to be completely gutted and renovated. In some cases the houses were a total loss and were torn down. Yes, there was grieving ... sometimes for a long time. But there was also resilience. I believe the strength that was shown came from a deep sense of self. Those who lost almost everything were not going to allow this disaster to define them. The possessions they owned did not own them and they could let them go ... with appropriate grieving ... but they could let them go and redefine themselves with the new opportunity. That comes from deep faith, and deep trust in God.

The man in the story knew there was something missing in his life. Again, the question I have is, “Am I ... are you ... even aware that there is something missing in our 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 big screen TV’s, and cars, and houses, and toys, and stock portfolios, and retirement accounts. I’m also talking about the intangibles possessions. 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 end 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 ... David Campbell ... wrote a book titled ***“What You Think of Me is None of My Business.”*** The book is about being who we really are, in spite of what others may think of us ... including our parents, alive or dead.

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 him go.

Every so often someone will come to me and tell me a similar story. 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, although I have a friend who did just that and is very, very happy. 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.

The people who were in the path of Hurricane Michael lost everything by what the insurance companies call "an act of God." My prayers go out to all of those who have their lives disrupted by this horrible event. And I support all the ways that we ... fortunate enough to have missed the winds and water this time ... can offer our assistance to those who are recovering from the devastation. However, some of those souls ... after their grieving is over ... will begin a new life unfettered by the possessions that had owned them. The storm may have stripped them naked. And for some that is an opportunity to see themselves as the beloved child of God ... made in the image of their Creator. They may not have known ... before Michael hit ... that

something was missing in their lives like the young man who ran to Jesus knew. But I imagine that some do now.

This is a lesson for us all.

Amen.