

Sermon: "What's in Your Wallet?" (B) 21 Pentecost Mark 10:17-31 Oct 13, 2024
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So...what's in *your* wallet, today? Now I must admit, when the Worship and Music Ministry came up with this familiar catch-phrase for the theme this week, my mind - perhaps yours, too, went directly to the company who used this slogan as their marketing tagline in their advertising campaign for a specific credit card. The company sought to influence the consumer with the idea of being prepared and having the necessary financial resources and tools readily available. The slogan was designed to highlight the importance of having the right financial solutions and resources at your disposal, implying that with this particular card, you can have the financial support you need to manage your finances effectively. By asking "What's in your wallet?" the slogan encouraged individuals to consider the contents of their wallets in terms of credit cards, financial resources, and banking services and a way to plan for their *future*.

And wouldn't you know, this is stewardship month. A time when the church looks in our "wallet", setting its budget for the upcoming year; looking ahead to how we can serve our community, our global outreach programs, events we host at the church for us and others, keep the lights on and... and pay the staff. And we, the congregation, are asked to take a look at our "wallet" - our time, our talents and our treasures. And...to top that off, we are confronted with the text in Mark today about the rich man and what he hopes his future to be and what he must have in his "wallet" to get it. So kudos to the Worship and Ministry team for coming up with what would appear to be an appropriate theme for this week.

But after a closer look at the gospel reading this week, I surmise Mark's Jesus is addressing much more than asking the man to sell everything he owned. And he owned a lot. His wealth was such that Jesus' words found him in a state of shock and disbelief and...and, even grief. I surmise Jesus' response to the rich man question, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" caught him off guard. I don't think he expected such a blunt response, especially a response to give everything away. Perhaps his fancy tunics, large herd of sheep and maybe some land...or whatever else the man clung to. And truth be told, when I was a kid and read this story from a literal viewpoint, it freaked me out, too! You see,

the only thing I could see in front of me were things. Oh, they were good things, toys, books - lots of books - stylish clothes - white leather go-go boots, bell bottom pants and a nice bike...etc. You get the idea. And of course, one day after church, I remember my mother asking what I would like to donate to help children in another part of the world. Even the thought of it didn't set right with me.

Later in life, I came to a different conclusion about this story. After my son and I spent several weeks in Jamaica working at a school for the deaf, I was appalled to think the students only had two changes of clothing. Their food every morning consisted of beans and rice - and not much of it. It was then that I wondered how I could perhaps let go of some of my (wealth) or "conveniences" - so that others could live with dignity and a fair share. That perhaps wealth - meant something other than just a lot more money or possessions.

"So what's in *your* wallet?"

At another point in my life I took the approach to this story from a popular interpretation... the one that talks about how hard it is for those of great wealth to enter the kingdom of God. And you got to love this storybook example that Mark's gospel gives Jesus, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." In other words, good luck. You see, at the entry gate to Jerusalem, it was thought that the eye of the needle was a small door in a larger gate where the camels would have to be unpacked before entering in. However, just to be clear, this was a fiction of the 9th century in order to spiritualize this passage. The area around the city gate was also a place where business deals were finalized; marriages were arranged; disputes were settled in the presence of witnesses. But this whole "camel through the eye of the needle thing" did help me reflect on what Jesus was talking about by way of this story. I wondered if there wasn't a bit of truth to what we may need to do to unburden ourselves of whatever might be keeping us from relying on God; from entering into abundant life - God's style. And that could be wealth, but it might not be, either.

So what's in *your* wallet, Paula?

The prophet Amos sheds a little light on this subject of wealth today as he addresses the northern kingdom of Israel. He is calling the people to

seek the Lord and live or things won't go well for them. Israel has displaced justice and righteousness and thinking that God won't notice. The people have turned justice into wormwood, bitter herb or literally, rot and drove righteousness right into the ground. Amos is accusing those in power with trampling the poor, making transactions that left the poor, more poor. Amos even goes so far as to tell those who are causing great harm to the marginalized and vulnerable, they will not move into the big houses they built; they will not reap the harvest of the vineyards they planted. No luxurious landscapes. No fine wine. God, Amos says, is unhappy with the economic and illegal dealings of the day.

I have to wonder, what Amos would think of our nation/ world today? Depart from evil. Do good. Practice Righteousness and Justice. How do we practice justice at the gate? How do we define what we do for the poor and defenseless? Pastor Jay Alanis, an ELCA pastor who works at the Texas border asked this: What would Amos *tell* us today? What would Amos *ask* of us today?

What in the world does the story about the rich man have to do with us, today, in our time? Oh sure, we know that wealth/possessions can entangle us and keep us from living fully into the kingdom, here and now. And we can get so caught up in our net worth or that of others that we live in a state of always wanting more...as if more would "finally" fulfill us. And yup, as the story goes, Jesus did ask the man to give away his possessions...to the poor. But one of the most astonishing things about this story, in my opinion, was how Jesus responded to the rich man. A man who *ran to Jesus*, humbled himself and fell on his knees. A "rich man" seeking a different kind of wealth than what was currently in his wallet. But Jesus - and you got this... Jesus responded to the man with love. No judgment. No condemnation. Just love.

Now, as I have chronicled my understanding of this text overtime, at this point in my life, I have to wonder if I wasn't a little closer to the mark of understanding this text as a kid. It rattles me, and it should, that Jesus just might be talking about my self-preservation and security in things other than what he calls me to. A call to discipleship where justice is served - perhaps by giving of my time, talents and treasures. Could it be, that sometimes we hang on to things so tightly, white-knuckled, that it makes

us sick? And yes, the grief of letting “it” go, can come as a shock sometimes. It did to the rich man. What if, in the gospel today, Jesus is asking something of *us*, giving *us* something to do, something to *give up* or *away*, or somewhere to *go* to help others?

You know, the rich man asked Jesus what he had to do to *inherit*, eternal life. Now the last time I checked, the only way one inherits something, is if someone dies. And someone did. On a cross. And eternal life and life here has already been paid for. But if being saved by grace through faith in Christ isn't the end all...then what's next? What if the gift of salvation can actually free us to do something: to love each other, to care for God's people and the world, to feed the hungry, care for the poor, speak out on behalf of the oppressed, participate community outreach programs, help at global mission events, engage in fellowship with those who may not look like us or talk like us, give of our time, talents and treasures.

And what if love is the foundation for all we do? So perhaps the question I ask myself and maybe you, too, is not, “What's *in* my/your wallet?” But “What's *not* in my wallet?” Amen.