

Sermon

October 14, 2012

Hebrews 4:12-16

Mark 10:17-31

“Just One Thing....”

*(Children's sermon earlier - picture of Jesus knocking at the door that has no exterior handle – Rev. 3:20 – WE must open our heart-doors to Jesus. We do so by helping a kid being bullied, by saying grace at meals, by coming to church, by praying, reading the Bible, etc..... song: “Into My Heart,” ..Come into my heart, Lord Jesus.)*

We live in a complicated time. Just about every day there's a new report of some public figure who has messed up..Sandusky..Politicians make missteps. The Head of the Board of Regents steps down, company heads get caught cheating. When the news breaks about one of these cases, I've come to see it as proof that, just as the Bible tells us in Genesis, people find it very easy to make really bad choices. In large and small ways, *we* also find it easy to make bad choices. We ourselves have learned that to be human *is* to err!

One of the most influential theologians of the 20th century, Karl Barth, wrote: "The most terrible thing that God can do to us is simply to let us proceed on our way without confronting us as to the possibility and the price." The good news is that God loves us and *does* challenge us, asking us even through today's Gospel lesson to really look at our own lives... What are we living for in life? What is getting in the way of our relationship with God? What keeps us from trusting the Lord? What keeps us from loving our neighbor?

In the gospel lesson for today, something prompted this man to run up and ask Jesus what he had to do to make sure that he would inherit eternal life. Jesus responded, "You know the commandments." And he did! The man was able to say that he was a keeper of all of them.

Things were fine up to that point. But then, the gospel-writer reports, Jesus looked 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." The man was stunned, and ended up walking away, full of grief.

The Bible tells us, "Jesus loved him." Jesus saw all the goodness, all of the desire that this man had to be right with God and the world. But at the same time, Jesus saw his stumbling block - the one thing that was keeping him from being able to actualize that love: He was trapped by his possessions. Out of Jesus' love came a word that was both the hope and the judgment of this man: "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have (or all that has you!) and give it away, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, and follow me."

Most of us have heard this story so many times that it may be hard to realize its original impact. But realize: back in Jesus' day, it was thought that if a man had lots of possessions, it meant that God was very pleased with him. So the story had a real JOLT to it for those who first experienced it. To recapture the “jolt,” listen to what happened years ago in NYC. Controversial Baptist preacher/writer/civil rights activist Will Campbell was asked to present a series at Riverside Church in New York City. Riverside is a beautiful Protestant cathedral on the

upper West Side, way up in the 120's. It prides itself on having had a series of famous ministers and parishioners, and has generally been on the forefront of social issues. Will Campbell has never been your typical preacher, especially not a typical Baptist preacher. He has been called a "radical southern prophet," fearlessly speaking out against injustices for years.

The theme for his presentation at Riverside was: "What Riverside Church Can Do to Help the Future of Race Relations in America." Campbell took as his text our gospel lesson for today, Mark's story of the rich man. Then he proceeded to preach: "What can Riverside Church do to help race relations? What can this church do to relate to its next-door neighbors in Harlem? Nothing! Nothing... unless you sell your big building and give it to the poor. Let's go out on the street and see what you can get for this big thing. Let's see what God will do with us." And he continued to challenge the people to take seriously that passage as if it were directed to them as much as to the man who had approached Jesus.

I'm sure you can guess that the host preacher and the congregation were not amused by Will Campbell's proposal. Not at all. That congregation wanted to know what they needed to do to be a liberal, right-thinking, contemporarily Christian congregation in society. They wanted ideas about how to make things better. They were keeping all of the laws they felt were important. There was a lot of very good work they were already accomplishing through their big building: programs of community outreach, day-care center, a committed and diversified worshiping congregation. So how was it that Riverside Church was held side by side with the rich man?? It seemed not at all appropriate and they were quite offended. (Various sources for this story)

The rich man didn't want to hear about his riches. Since his youth he had followed the laws and lived a good life.. The rich man had approached Jesus, running. He departed from Jesus, dragging. Mark tells us: "At that saying his face fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions."

Now we who are listening to this story today may be tempted to hear that the man was rich and say, "Well, this message is certainly not about *me*, since I am anything but wealthy! I can barely make it through to the end of each month... So I am safe; I don't have to worry about this challenge from Jesus." Wrong! If money doesn't get in the way, it's likely that something else does! Our Lord looks at each of us, deeply, with great wisdom, and he knows what it is we can't let go of, what "clogs" our ability to love God and love others., what keeps us from opening the door to our hearts. Just because we don't have a lot of money does not get us off the hook!

C.S. Lewis, in his book, *The Magnificent Defeat*, tells a story about heaven and hell. Heaven is a wonderful place where everyone is happy and life there has meaning. Hell is just about as bad as anyone can imagine, nothing ever works out right, everyone is cross and insistent on having his/her own way, and no one ever gives in. The ironic aspect is seen when the people from hell take a bus trip to have a picnic just outside the gates of heaven. Everything is going wrong for the picnickers, no one is having a good time, everyone is miserable...and the people from heaven come out to invite them to leave hell and come in to heaven. There are no guards, nothing is stopping the hellions from leaving the picnic and going to heaven, but none do.

For to go to heaven requires one thing, that they give up that one thing in their life that they hold sacred. For one man it is the certainty that he was right and his partner was wrong and that is why their business failed; and he will never forget it or forgive him. His partner is in heaven and tries to tell him that it really isn't important who was right or wrong and that he could realize it and be happy if he would let it go. NO WAY!

A woman who always sits in the front on bus trips will have nothing to do with those people of other races. "They are inferior, and I am better than they are," she says over and over. If going to heaven means she has to associate with them then she would rather stay in hell. / A musician holds onto his violin, a scientist clings to his theory, a man to the dream of being married to his childhood sweetheart who left him for another. There is no way they can let go of their possessions, they complain as they board the bus once again and head back down to hell. (*The Magnificent Defeat*, CS Lewis)

One thing you lack, just this one thing. Go and deal with this, then come and follow me. Our Lord looks deeply into our hearts.

The disciples were upset by Jesus' teaching that day. If even a good-hearted rich man who lived by God's law couldn't make it into God's kingdom, "Who then, can be saved? Should we just forget about trying and go home now?"

Jesus' response points to our salvation: "With people/man it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God." All things, even those things we find within ourselves.

So what would Jesus say to you or to me? What "one thing is needful or lacking" for each of us? Perhaps it is a resentment that we hold and refuse to release; or something we have done and now regret. Maybe it is a possession that we have or desperately want which consumes our hearts and minds and energy; or a relationship that is choking the life out of us. It could be anxiety over what lies ahead, anxiety so strong that we cannot even start to sense God's presence with us. Whatever this "thing" is for each of us, when we find ourselves at Jesus' feet asking, what do I need to do to inherit eternal life, it is here, in this most hidden and secret place, that we will find the answer.

When Jesus stood before that wealthy man and told him to sell all he owned and then come and follow him, Jesus knew how hard a thing he was asking. Remember how, at the beginning of his public ministry, after his baptism, Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days? During that time he was tempted by Satan, and one of those temptations was to have ownership of all things. He knows how hard it is for us, but he looks at us in love, and knows just as well how much we are missing in life by not fully following and trusting God.

Jesus, the writer to the Hebrews explained, is the High Priest who has struggled, first-hand, with the very same things with which we struggle. He is totally able "to sympathize with us in our weaknesses." He addresses us where we are now; he looks deep into our hearts and offers us an assessment of what is keeping us from living in the abundance God wants us to live; he

invites us to confess our weakness to him, and to make changes as we dare in faith; and then he fills us with blessing and grace... He does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. All we have to do is open our heart-doors by asking for help: Lord I cannot manage this myself; please help me.

It is said that the African impala is able to jump to a height of over 10 feet and to cover a distance, with one jump, of over thirty feet. In spite of this, impalas can be kept in an enclosure in any zoo with a three-foot wall. Why? The animals will not jump if they cannot see where their feet will land. (*Larson, Illustrations for Preaching & Teaching*)

When we hear the story of Jesus' challenge to the rich man, when we hear any of the promises of God from the Bible, we have to answer for ourselves: can this be true for ME? Even if I don't know "where my feet will land," can I trust it? Is it really possible?

Each of us is invited to look at the hidden and desperate places of our lives, and to ask God for help. What do you need to really trust God? What holds you back from KNOWING the love and power of God in your life? What keeps you locked up in a limited enclosure of your own making?

Jesus Christ came to set us free. He knows us, our good stuff and our bad, the time we have, our weaknesses and strengths, and he wants us to really live, now and eternally. He knows where each of us stumbles and where we're afraid.. He can speak the word of challenge or encouragement as we need.. And he invites each of us to face the impossible aspects of our lives hand in hand with the One who specializes in making life possible!

With us, it is impossible. With God, it is life, life for you now and life forever. By the grace of God, may we hear this Good News and let it claim us for life. Amen.