

My husband, Woody, grew up in a small town in Alabama, "Lower Alabama or L.A.," he calls it. Thinking about the kind of LOVE Jesus showed in today's gospel reading, he wrote the following:

"There was only one person who functioned as advisor, career and guidance counselor, test score interpreter, in the High School which I attended many decades ago. Mrs. Vickery was the wife of the superintendent and had held that position for as long as anyone could remember. She was well past the age of retirement but she said that she kept the job because she just loved the children. She knew most everyone by their first name, and if not she knew their family. As a matter of fact, she had held that same position when many of the students' parents had gone there a generation earlier. And she was the most supportive person you can imagine—for everyone: I remember going in to talk with her to hear about some test results and hear the news about what kind of future I could expect. What I remember was Mrs. Vickery smiling and saying, "I'm sure you can be whatever you want to be." Which made me think that I must have done exceedingly well on whatever tests those were that I had taken. In reality, my scores were not that impressive.

Not only was her advice not very helpful, but later I learned that she used that same line on just about everyone who came to see her. Instead of talking about strengths and weaknesses, about potentials and possibilities, she wanted to affirm everyone. In short, her warm loving advice gave no direction, offered no clear picture, misled people. To refuse to tell people the truth about themselves can only create delusions and is neither helpful nor loving for anyone."

In the gospel lesson for today, something prompted a man to run up and ask Jesus what he had to do to 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 closely, *loved* him, and said, "You lack one thing: Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor; then you will have treasure in heaven." The man was stunned, and ended up being the only person called by Jesus to turn away from him.

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 own 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!); 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 we can shrug it off. But we need to remember that back in Jesus' day, it was believed that if a person had lots of possessions, this meant that God was very pleased with him. So this story had a real JOLT for those who first experienced it. Mark tells us: "At that saying his face fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions." Jesus had asked him to do

the one thing he could not do.

Over the past few weeks we have seen several reports of people who have been evacuated from their homes because of fire or flooding. In South Carolina this week again and again folks would say some variation of: "The water came up so suddenly, all we could do was grab what we could and go. We lost everything, but all of that stuff can be replaced. Thank God we are alive!!"

Disasters boil things down to what really matters, and Jesus, as he looked with love on the man asking him what more he had to do to get into heaven, did too. He saw into the man's heart what really mattered to him and told him what was clogging his faith arteries.

The rich man didn't want to hear about his riches. Since his youth he had followed the Jewish laws, the Ten Commandments, and lived a good life. And remember, this rich man was RUNNING as he approached Jesus. But when he left Jesus, he was dragging. Jesus had seen very clearly exactly what the man could not give up.

C.S. Lewis, in his book, *The Great Divorce*, 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 Great Divorce*, CS Lewis)

One thing you lack, just this one thing. Go and deal with this, and then come and follow me. Our Lord looks with piercing love into our hearts. The piercing love asks us to do something hard, something that will lead us to meaning in our lives. As William Willimon, retired UMC Bishop, wrote: "Instead of changing the gospel to fit our inadequacies, we ought to change ourselves to fit the Gospel. Alas, I am that rich young man." (*Pulpit Resources*, Vol. 42, No. 4, p. 12)

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. Even the things that clog OUR faith "arteries."

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. It could be an addiction that has locked us in a self-destructive pattern. 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 right 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, how 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 with 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.

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 defeated life 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, our feelings of failure and hurt, 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 whatever seems impossible about 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.