

## **Sermon: PENTECOST 20, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015**

In the Name...

A fellow was being interviewed for a post in the Communist Party and was asked, "If you had two houses, what would you do?" "Sell one", the applicant replied, "and give the money to the party". "And if you had two cars?" "Sell one and give the money to the party". "And if you had two bicycles?" There was an awkward pause at this moment at which the chairman said, "Ah, so you have two bicycles."

There's a serious temptation when facing this morning's Gospel to be either too strict or too loose about it and, either way, to say it doesn't apply to me and move along.

For example, we might take comfort that we probably don't have the great wealth this young man had. When Jesus told him to sell everything and give it to the poor, those words are probably only for those super rich people, like Bill Gates or Warren Buffet, and not us middle class. Or, on the other hand, these words might just be for that one man. After all, Jesus didn't tell everyone he met they had to sell all. So, even if we are super rich, we don't have to worry about this, either.

Well, that was easy. Not much more to say, is there? Before getting too comfortable, though, what if Jesus really has something to say to all of us in the Gospel this morning? Hmm.

Now, why do we come to church? Are we seeking a closer relationship with God, or direction to strengthen our spiritual lives, or the means of grace and the hope of glory?

Those are all excellent reasons for coming to church. Of course, one hopes we don't come to earn "bonus points" by, for example, putting a big cheque in the collection - though I won't object if anyone wants to try.

But, seriously, aren't we all concerned with figuring out what it is we need to do to find ourselves in heaven one day?

This young man was. Look at his question, What must I do to ...to what?...what does it say?...to earn eternal life? No, to inherit eternal life. Well, what do you have to do to inherit anything? Nothing. You just have to be in the family. This young man was seeking an assurance from Jesus that he was in the family, that he would be mentioned in the will, so to speak. He wanted to know from Jesus how he could be sure.

So, Jesus says, "Well, you know the commandments." And then he proceeds to list a few of the Big Ten. And the young man says, oh, that's not a problem, he's kept all of them. Wow! That's great. That's also quite an amazing claim because what are the Ten Commandments? They are ten examples which God gave the ancient Israelites of the way humans are to relate first to God and then to each other.

Jesus summed them up when he said love God with all your heart, mind, and soul, and love your neighbour as yourself, and that's what they mean. They're not a checklist of ten specific things to do or avoid, they're about a whole attitude, a way of life. They're about our personal walk with God. They're not so much about how to behave as much as they're about how to be - and that's an important difference.

So when this fellow says he's kept the Commandments perfectly he's saying that his understanding of God's will, and his relationship with his neighbour, are both absolutely perfect. And he's saying this to Jesus, of all people.

It's almost comical. No wonder Jesus smiled. Yes, he smiled. It says he looked at the young man with "hagapete." It's a word which can mean "compassion", "pleasure", or "charity." In any event, it implies some sort of positive feeling.

For, despite the fact that the young man has made an incredible claim, Jesus is not offended. He knows this guy is genuine. Remember that this fellow sought him out, knelt before him and called him "didaskale agathos", noble, worthy, teacher. He recognized that Jesus was someone special, someone of authoritative spirituality.

And it is in this context that Jesus said, "Sell all you have and give it away." This means, "Well, if you claim total spiritual perfection then you must be totally free from all earthly ties." It's a challenge for the young man to see that he has set himself an impossible standard. He wants to be godlier than God. Unfortunately, the young man goes away, sad, it says, because he had "great possessions."

Now commentators are divided at this point. Some say the young man was sad because he was greedy and wasn't going to give up a penny of his wealth. But, others say - and this is worth considering - that the young man was sad because he was actually going to do it. He was such a literalist that it made him sad to think that to get into heaven he would have to live the rest of his life in poverty.

I can understand his feelings. It would make me sad. And I don't think Sue would be all that happy, either.

You see, this lesson isn't about money. It's about spirituality. The fact is that material possessions are part of who and what we are. And, sure, there have been famous ascetics, like Gandhi, who have literally given up everything, but, God doesn't require that. All God wants is for us to use what we've got, however much or little, in the best way that enhances our spiritual life.

Living in spiritual health is all we're asked to do. I suppose we could call this stewardship because the stewardship of who we are as God's children is really what wellness is all about and this young man was not well. He had in his mind the image of a capricious God, a God who would keep us guessing how to please him, and he was trying to find ways to please such a fickle being. Had he stopped to reflect, however, he would have realized that not even total poverty

would suffice to gain such a deity's favour. You can't win with that kind of god. It's a sad spirituality.

And standing before him was the Son of a God who loved all whom He had made and who was sent specifically to assure us that all of us are in the family.

What do we have to do to inherit eternal life? Just be part of the family and live as one of the family, in loving relationship to the Father and with all our brothers and sisters.

Yes, there are always a few things in life we can do without - everything, in fact, which hinders our wellness. Sometimes, those may be material possessions, but, other times it just might be an unrealistic view of God, or an unforgiving spirit or an impossible standard we set ourselves, or impose on others. They're just as much a problem, in fact, they may be worse because they can get into our souls and minds and drag us down. We can definitely do without them. Let's think, then, of how we can get rid of those kinds of possessions.

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