

“Possession Obsession”
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRode
The Twenty-Eighth Sunday
in Ordinary Time
“Family Business Sunday”
October 11, 2009
Scripture: Mark 10:17-31

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *Lord Jesus, who has called each of us to follow and to be your disciples, grant us to see you, not as a means for getting what we want from God, but rather as God’s means for getting for what God wants from us. Amen.*

I heard a story once about an expert in diamonds who happened to be seated on an airplane beside a woman with a huge diamond on her finger. Finally, the man introduced himself and said, “I couldn’t help but notice your beautiful diamond. I am an expert in precious stones. Please tell me about that stone.” She replied, “This is the famous Klopman diamond, one of the largest in the world. But there is a strange curse which comes with it.” Now the man was really interested. “Really,” he asked, “What is the curse?” As he waited with baited breath, she replied “It’s Mr. Klopman”.

Maybe some of you want to re-evaluate your diamonds on that basis...Seriously, though; the true curse attached to any kind of valuable possession is its capacity to steal our hearts and souls.

Most of you know that I tend to be a “glass half full person” – my mother used to say I was a Pollyanna. I don’t think that’s true, although I will say I am usually pretty good at finding the positive in any situation. And while I know that many of us here in this room are struggling due to lost jobs, lost income, in some cases, lost homes and or businesses. And while I know that most of us do not feel rich, compared to most of the people who have ever lived, we are rich.

Let me read you a prayer written by scholar William Boice: “Dear Lord, I have been re-reading the record of the Rich Young Ruler and his obviously wrong choice. But it has set me thinking. No matter how much wealth he had, he could not ride in a car, have any surgery, turn on a light, buy penicillin, hear

a pipe organ, watch TV, wash dishes in running water, type a letter, mow a lawn, fly in an airplane, sleep on in inner spring mattress, or talk on the phone.” Then William Boice adds these words, “If he was rich, then what am I?” He’s right, Isn’t he? We are rich!

And like the rich young man in today’s gospel text, we know ourselves, we identify ourselves, we define ourselves, by our possessions, our things, our “stuff.” The first thing that impresses me when I read this story is that the rich young ruler was so near to the kingdom. He asked all the right questions. He understood the Law and he understood Jesus’ teaching. But in the end, love of money kept him out. This young man was so possessed by his stuff, that he could “unstuff” himself neither for the sake of the poor, nor for his own sake and his quest for eternal life. Faced with the choice between his old secure, in-control, in-charge self and the unknown possibilities of life as a disciple of Jesus, the rich man clung to his human illusions of power and control.

It wasn’t the fact that the man owned many things which led to his sadness upon hearing Jesus’ words. Actually, Jesus had talked with many other rich people and never required such a sacrifice. He did not ask Zaccheus – a rich tax collector – to give up his wealth. Nicodemus was a wealthy man from the Jewish Sanhedrin but Jesus never asked him to sell it all and give it to the poor. The difference is that these other men, while they were wealthy, were not controlled by their wealth. The difference is that the others with whom Jesus has spoken, while they were wealthy, were not controlled by their wealth. I wonder where we fall in this story.

I don’t often quote the Dalai Lama, but this Buddhist leader said something in a recent book we need to hear. He writes that when traveling in the United States, he is frequently invited into the most luxurious mansions imaginable. He says that those who reside in those mansions want for nothing. They have it all, according to the world’s standards. And yet, he says, he feels loneliness and sadness in those mansions in a way he never feels it when he is visiting the poor little villages of impoverished countries, including his native Nepal.

He says members of these tiny communities in what we call “The Third World” don’t feel the same greed, envy and deprivation that we do, because

everyone is in the same boat, and keeping body and soul together is a common goal. In Western societies based on consumerism, we look to THINGS to make us happy rather than allowing ourselves to be dependent on God and interdependent with one another. We believe that the latest iPod, the newest fashions, and a cable TV hookup with five hundred channels will fulfill us. And we suffer for it, because when the thrill of a new acquisition wears off, we feel a vague, nagging sense of dissatisfaction. And so we look for new products to buy, rather than examining the deficits in ourselves and our intimate relationships.

You know, when I was growing up, it always seemed to me that those people who have the most money, are the ones who seem to have the most trouble trusting God. Maybe it is just because they haven’t had much practice. When they need bread they don’t pray for it, they go to the store and buy it. The poor, on the other hand, don’t always have that option.

“Where will we get bread?” they ask. They don’t have any money. They can’t go to the store and buy it. Finally, in desperation, they pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” When it comes, they say, “Thank you God!” They learn to trust because they have no other choice. I have learned over the years, though, that it really has nothing to do with how much money you have. It is all about how much faith you have. The two things are often connected because those who are self-reliant are out of practice when it comes to trusting anyone but themselves.

The rich man in our story had been able to buy most of the things he needed. But the one thing he really needed he found he could not buy. “How can I inherit eternal life?” he asks. Jesus says, “By letting go – by learning, as the poor have learned, to put all your trust in God.”

Having things – whether it is money, a house, or other material possessions, do not prevent us from becoming disciples of Jesus in this world. It is only when those possessions become more important than following Jesus, that we become – like the rich young man in our story – wealthy in things, but poor in spirit. The point of this scripture lesson, if you ask me is – that – regardless of how much we have – or don’t have – we are asked to view the

things we have accumulated in this world, not as ours, but as belonging to God.

Family Business

1. Why are our utilities so high? Everyone's utilities have gone up. This is a community church which opens its doors to many groups for their programs. Because of the humidity in Florida, we must keep the air-conditioning on low at all times.
2. Why is the insurance so high? Again, everyone's insurance has gone up. The church has been working on ways to lower insurance for years. The price is either too high or the risks are too high. Our biggest threat is fire.
3. How long have we had a deficit? According to church treasurers from many years ago, we have almost always had a deficit. The problem today is that our reserves are being depleted at an unprecedented rate.
4. Does the preschool pay any of the expense of the church? Yes. 14% insurance, less wind; 80% electricity of the CE building; 30% of water/sewer/garbage; 20% of Church Administrator's salary and Social Security.
5. Does it cost anything to be a part of the P.C.(U.S.A.)? Yes. Every year the church is charged a per capita fee. That fee supports the programs and resources of the Presbytery, the Synod and General Assembly.
6. What were the Session's suggested "cuts" in the budget for 2010? "Session has suggested \$41,000 in "cuts" to the 2010 budget. They would come from salaries and church programs.

Jesus revealed to the rich young man the heart of his shortcomings. His "stuff" blocked the staff of life. His love of stuff blocked his way to genuine discipleship, to the kingdom of God. Jesus challenged the man to give up his trust in things, to relinquish his hold on what he held, to give up his control, to take up God's security.

In exchange, Jesus offered the rich man a place as one of his disciples. Here was an offer from the Messiah to travel with him, to live and walk with

him on an intimate, daily basis. That Jesus' words hit directly at the center of this rich man's most damaged, separated self, is evident by the pain those words cause him. The rich man does not scoff or jeer at Jesus' suggestion. He is "shocked" and goes away "grieving," in obvious pain. He feels the truth of Jesus' diagnosis. But he is not able to reach out and take the offered cure.

We – you and I – are offered the same cure. We – you and I – are invited to be disciples – to travel and live and walk with Jesus on a daily basis. Can we?

May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

Thanks to William H. Willimon for his sermon, "And the Reason Was Money", Candace Chellew-Hodge for her sermon, "Possessed by Possessions", King Duncan for his sermon, "The Good News About Money", Brett C. Blair's sermon, "What Must I DO to Receive Life?", Leonard Sweet for his sermon, "When Too Much Can Be Too Little" and the Interpreter's Commentary on the Gospel of Mark..

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