

“From Me to We”

Psalm 142 and Mark 10:17-27

Sunday, February 25, 2018

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

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On this second Sunday of Lent, we hear another psalm, to invite us into a spirit of prayerfulness. The writer of Psalm 142 feels very alone and afraid, calling out to God for help.

The gospel lesson for today is about a rich man who is alone. His encounter with Jesus is one of the more familiar teachings of the gospels, with variations in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In Matthew the rich man is described as young. In Luke, he is described as a ruler. In Mark, he's just rich, with many possessions.

Context is almost always important. Just before our gospel reading, Jesus was teaching his disciples about receiving the Kingdom of God like a child. The rich man in contrasts wants to know what to do to inherit this life. Listen for God's word.

¹⁷ As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁸ Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” ²⁰ He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” ²¹ Jesus, looking 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; then come, follow me.” ²² When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³ Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” ²⁴ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ 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.” ²⁶ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

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Jesus had a lot to say about money. He spoke about wealth and possessions more than any other topic, aside from the Kingdom of God. And for those of us who have a reasonable amount of money, his words are quite challenging.

I remember being in a Bible study at a church a long time ago in a middle or upper middle-class community, and we were talking about wealth and poverty and issues in the world. Someone mentioned the challenge of Jesus teaching that his followers have to sell their possessions and give to the poor, and many of us felt a little uncomfortable.

Someone else in the group quickly spoke up and said that Jesus told this one particular man to do sell all possessions, and that he didn't say everyone had to do so. We all breathed a sigh of relief.

But then we read about how Jesus taught that it is hard for rich people to enter into to the Kingdom of God. We continued to pray and ponder about how to be faithful Christians, without our cars, and homes, and vacations, and savings.

Elsewhere Jesus speak of the blessings for the poor and for the generous, and of challenges and perils for the wealthy and greedy and selfish. Other scripture passages warn us of the danger of excessive wealth and possessions.

So this gospel reading invites a decent sermon on this topic, of the danger of wealth, especially now in the season of Lent.

I could talk about families torn about fighting over money.

I could include a lot of statistics about average income in our community and global poverty, along with research studies which show how rich people are not any happier than poor people.

I could cite many other scripture verses which echo the teachings about the dangers of wealth

I could talk about how our possessions possess us.

I could even include the old saying “You never see a U-Haul behind a hearse.”

And I could make an inspiring plea for you do donate possessions to our Trash and Treasure sale next Saturday, which benefits our youth ministry, and which will gladly receive your items until Wednesday of this week.

But, I’m not going to preach that sermon today. Phew, right?

In reflecting on this passage recently, I was struck by the way Jesus seems to be calling the rich man to think about more than himself, to be concerned with others, to move from me to we.

All of the commandments that Jesus mentioned have to do with how we treat each other: murder, adultery, stealing, lying, honoring our parents. How we relate to others is really important. Jesus tells this man to sell his possessions and give to the poor people around him—people who apparently weren’t on his radar.

Jesus has a way of reformulating the question. The man asks about inheriting eternal life. That’s a “me” question. Jesus answers not about heaven or eternal life, but instead about the Kingdom of God, the new reality of justice and righteousness that Jesus proclaimed and invited people to be part of. That’s a “we” response.

Jesus changes the questions and points this individual looking for personal reaffirmation outward, toward his neighbors.

Jesus also changed the question with the parable of the Good Samaritan, when a lawyer asked Jesus about inheriting eternal life. Jesus told him to love God and neighbor. He asks “who is my neighbor.” Jesus tells the story about a

foreigner helping a man in distress, and asks “who acted like a neighbor?” He tries to move the man from me to we.

Christian faith repeatedly pushes us outward, toward other people, toward really loving our neighbors. It’s not just about me inheriting a place in heaven, or about my personal relationship with God, or how much God loves me. It’s about us, as we’re in it together.

An important part of our Reformed tradition involves acknowledging our sin before God. So Sunday after Sunday, we have a Prayer of Confession. At 11 it’s printed in the bulletin, and 9 it is included in the opening prayer.

The language in those prayers is almost always first person plural—we language, not me language. That’s not accidental. We are in this together.

We have communion and baptisms together here in the sanctuary, not in private. We’re in this together.

God calls us into community and God calls us to love our neighbors.

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I’ve enjoyed watching some of the Olympics over the past two weeks. While I was delighted to see the USA men’s curling team win a gold and while I was intrigued by the Hungarian figure skater who skated to a medley of AC/DC music (yes that really happened), I think my favorite Olympic moment came at the end of the men’s 15K Cross Country race.

The medals went to skiers from traditional winter Olympic powerhouses Switzerland, Norway, Russia. They all finished the exhausting endurance race of 9 miles in about 34 minutes.

Over 20 minutes later, the final few skiers crossed the line, from countries not traditionally considered Winter Olympic powerhouses: Mexico, Colombia, Morocco, Ecuador, Lebanon, Pakistan, and Tonga, that small nation in the South Pacific, with the guy who marches shirtless.

Several of these athletes from what they call “the exotic countries” spend time training together.

So while many of the fans had already left, these “exotic” athletes cheered each other on.

The final skier to finish was from Mexico. According to the Washington Post account:

The Mexican, German Madrazo, 43, looked halting through his last stretch. He looked as if his body might fold in on itself. For a second, it seemed he might not make it and that after all that fight against all that backup ski and ice that all the other skiers had made, he and his Mexican flag might tumble into the snow. The remaining crowd cheered him on, with a few Swiss flags here, Norwegian flags there, South Korean flags here, all waving in support, for this moment, of Mexico.

After he crossed the finished line, he friends lifted him up on their shoulders as if he had just won the gold medal in world record time.

The article continues: “They all formed a beautiful blob of a group hug, and then they all — all stragglers and all Olympians — put Madrazo on their shoulders as he waved his flag.”

And then the gold medalist from Switzerland came over to congratulate them all. It’s a great story. I’ve posted the article on the church Facebook page.

Source: https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/olympics/thirty-six-minutes-after-the-gold-medal-was-won-the-olympics-happened/2018/02/16/283130a8-130d-11e8-9570-29c9830535e5_story.html?utm_term=.1dff9d585c26

With so focus on the competition for who wins the medals, we can lose track of the athleticism and the camaraderie and the beauty of people from different nations and cultures and religions coming together with joy.

In our world today we all know how there is too much selfishness and competition and greed, and in our politics there is too much partisanship instead of cooperation.

We see this “me first” thinking in Washington, and we see it in our workplaces, our neighborhoods, our homes. We can do better. We need to do better.

Martin Luther King said it well: We must learn to live together as brothers [and sisters] or perish together as fools.

We need to remember that Jesus didn't ignore the rich man, or sneer at him, but as the text says, he loved him. The love of God gives us strength to do the right thing.

As Christians, we are called to work together for the common good, to love our neighbors, and join with each other to serve the Kingdom of God.

Jesus came, proclaiming the good news of God's love for each of us, and for all of us. The Good News isn't just for me, it's for all of us.

Amen.