

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
October 11, 2009
Mark 10:17-31

“The Power of Money”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

I know a story about Gandhi—I forget when I heard or read it—it may be true, it may be apocryphal, I am not sure. But it goes like this...a reporter from the U.S.A. was doing a story on Gandhi. The reporter followed Gandhi around for several days observing his life, hearing him speak, watching him pray. After a few days, the reporter said to Gandhi, “You are a deeply holy person, that is very clear to me. And you seem to live your life according to Christian tenets and values. I know you are Hindu but please explain to me: what actually separates you from most Christians?” Gandhi responded, “Oh, I think Jesus meant it.”

I thought of this story when I read the Scripture reading assigned for today in the Common Lectionary. The story of Jesus walking along the way with his disciples’ a rich man runs up to Jesus, kneels and asks Jesus how he might inherit eternal life. Jesus tells the man to sell his possessions, give the money to the poor and follow him. The man is shocked, turns away grieving.

Does Jesus mean it?

Does Jesus mean sell all your possessions, give the money to the poor and follow me?

Does Jesus mean that literally?

And if he does, was he speaking to that particular rich man, or to all of us?

These are good questions for us to wrestle with.

This week, while thinking about and researching different interpretations of the Jesus and the rich man, I came across this reflection by Tony Campolo, the evangelical activist and preacher. Campolo says that when he was a young man he read the story about Jesus and the rich man, heard Jesus tell the man to sell all that he had and give the money to the poor and the story deeply troubled him. Am I supposed to do THAT? Campolo wondered. Did Jesus really mean it? The story caused Campolo real problems. But then Tony Campolo went to Seminary,

studied higher criticism of scripture, and his professors told him the story did not mean what he first thought. The learned professors said, Jesus did not mean to say “Go sell all you have, give it to the poor, then follow me.” Jesus meant to say, “You need to be willing to give away all you have to the poor.” You don’t actually have to do it, the professors told the Tony Campolo, the Seminarian, he wrote later in an essay, you just need to be open to the possibility of doing it. “Phew” Tony said to himself, “that’s good to know what Jesus really meant by this. That makes things a whole lot easier.”

Years later, Campolo writes, long after he had graduated from Seminary, when he was preaching in churches, lecturing nationwide, and writing books and articles, he prayed on this text again and got in touch with his youthful discomfort with the passage. What if, he thought again, what if Jesus really DID mean exactly what he said?

This week, in our Tuesday Morning Clergy Bible Study Group, someone read the passage out loud, as we always do. Then we began to discuss it. There are eight of us in that group and early on in the discussion it became apparent that four of us thought Jesus really meant what he said. And four of us thought Jesus was speaking metaphorically.

And so today I present you with a dilemma.

Did Jesus mean what he said?

Or was he speaking in metaphor?

And if Jesus did mean it, was he speaking exclusively to that particular rich man or was he speaking more broadly to all his disciples and followers and to us today?

To answer these questions, let’s look at the story once more.

A rich man runs up to Jesus in broad daylight—unlike Nicodemus who came to Jesus by night. The man kneels before Jesus and asks, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Notice: the rich man already knows there is something more he should be doing—he does have some awareness of that.

Jesus tries to brush him off: “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.”

The rich man has a quick retort, basically yeah yeah yeah, I have been keeping the commandments since my youth. Note: this is a pious Jew. He knows the commandments and has followed them since his youth.

Then the story gets interesting.

Jesus begins to really pay attention.

He is not brushing this guy off any longer. Listen to the change in tone, “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.”

Jesus looks at the man.

He sees him.

He takes him in fully.

He loves him.

He tells him what to do.

AND Jesus invites him, calls him to be a disciple.

The rich man believes that Jesus means what he says and says what he means and the man simply cannot do it. He cannot part with his stuff, give the money to the poor and follow Jesus.

The rich man turns away, grieving.

This is the only place in the Gospels where someone has a direct face-to-face call to discipleship by Jesus and turns away.

And the reason is money.

The rich man did not walk away because he failed to believe that Jesus was the Savior or because he was not positive that Jesus was Lord.

He walked away because he could not part with his stuff.

When Jesus called Peter and Andrew and the other poor fisherman to be his disciples, they dropped what they were doing, left what they had and followed him. But the rich man cannot.

I think Jesus saw and loved the rich man. And I think Jesus meant what he said.

Essentially Jesus was saying: you have too much baggage to fit through the pearly gates, like a camel cannot fit through the eye of a needle.

Lose the stuff and you will be free enough, light enough, unencumbered enough to follow me. Until then your life is too cluttered, you are too distracted.

You have your eye on your stuff. Your eye needs to be on the poor.

Take care of people, not things.

After prayerful consideration, I think Jesus meant what he said when he said it. And I think he was speaking not just to that one rich man, but to all of us. Half of my Clergy Bible Study group does NOT agree with me and you might not either.

But here's my thinking...

When Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to fit through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God," we think to ourselves, "Yeah, someone who is rich, like Paris Hilton, Bill Gates or Donald Trump."

But I think Jesus is talking about people like us.

In Jesus' day, *rich* did not mean owning dozens of chariots, a summer place on the Red Sea, a pool out back. In Jesus' time, "rich" meant anyone living above bare subsistence level.

The people Jesus spoke to, touched, and healed each day were peasants who bought or gathered just enough food for one day, each and every day, if they were lucky.

By the standards of 1st century Palestine, most of us in this Sanctuary are the rich man.

By the standards of 21st century America, most of us in this Sanctuary are the rich man.

If you live in the U.S. and have even a very very modest home and income (not all of you do, I know) but IF YOU DO, you are wealthier than the 2.7 billion people in the world who make and live on less than \$2 a day.

I think Jesus is talking to us.

I think he meant what he said then, and I think it applies to us today.

I think our stuff does hold us back, I think our stuff gets in our way.

I think our stuff prevents us from being as fully generous as we might be.

I think we're like the people in the famous cartoon who arrive at the pearly gates of heaven with too much luggage and cannot fit through the opening.

Many times over the last four years, many times right from this pulpit I have said: Sin is anything that prevents you from fully receiving God's goodness and grace and sharing it with the rest of the world.

Sin is anything that blocks that clear channel within you from receiving and giving God's love. And so sin in your life might be the bottle, drugs or sex addiction, gambling addiction or too much stuff or the love of money.

People misquote the Bible all the time. Folks believe the Bible says, "Money is the root of all evil." In fact the passage from 1 Timothy 6:10 say, "The love of money is the root of all evil."

I think Jesus wants us to love him more than we love our stuff or our wallet.

And do I think that is easy? No.

I am speaking to myself as much as I am speaking to you. (Remember the saying: "preachers always give the sermon THEY need to hear.")

Like most of you, I have stuff.

I have not sold it all to follow Jesus. And I have my little rationalizations:

Well, we own a home but it's small. And we don't own a second home.

Well we own two cars, but one is a hybrid and the other is an Echo.

Well I have lovely jewelry, but my sister the jeweler made most of it just for me.

Well I have first class hand stitched expensive hiking boots, but I feel close to God when I walk in the wilderness.

Can you hear it?

Me trying so hard to justify my comfortable middle-class lifestyle.

Half of my Clergy Bible Study thinks Jesus did not mean it.

But I think he meant it.

I agree with that old adage: the function of religion is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

And I think I am and most of you are works in progress. Maybe in time I will choose to sell or give away what I own and give the money to the poor. I am still growing and changing and so are you. I think Jesus meant it. I am not able to follow him that fully yet but my spiritual journey is not over.

Sometimes we have insights, we hear God's voice, we even see the path but we cannot quite walk down it yet. But that does not mean we never will. I am on a spiritual journey, just as you are, moving forward with fits and starts straining to hear the word of God.

I have a quote from Annie Dillard up in my study at home and it helps me to be generous to our church and to the causes I believe in. Dillard says,

One thing I know is this: Spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for later; give it, give it all, give it now. Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes.

The wisdom of Annie Dillard.

The prophetic words of Mahatma Gandhi.

The revelation of Tony Campolo.

The disagreements of clergy colleagues.

All these ingredients are tossed into the pot and stirred in with the today's Biblical text—the story of the rich man who kneels before Jesus and asks about inheriting eternal life. I open the pot lid and stir the all the stories, analysis, experiences, opinions and commentary I can find. Stir it all together with that difficult passage from the Bible.

When that stew boils down I find these key elements remain, at least for me...

Jesus meant what he said.

He was talking to me.

I am listening.

And I am on a journey of faith and growth and change.

On a spiritual journey.

With all of you.

Praise God.

Amen.