

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 23
Year B

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15
Psalm 90:12-17
Hebrews: 4:12-16
Mark 10:17-31

The tenth chapter of the Gospel according to Mark is centered around three questions. Each of these questions focuses on a different aspect of human interactions - sex, power, and money. Last week, we saw how divorce is generally a symptom of sexual misconduct, adultery, in the first century. While the Jews had one set of rules from Scripture, the Greco-Roman culture around them had a different view of divorce. Next week, we will hear about power and how it might impact the relationships within the church. Today's reading focuses on money and how wealth can hinder our relationship with God as well as with our fellow citizens.

The reading begins with a man approaching Jesus with a question - "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" While his posture of kneeling before Jesus might be considered a sign of respect, his address of Jesus as "Good Teacher" shows he is trying to make a positive impression on Jesus and get Jesus to show similar respect for him. Consider how a wealthy person might confront a political leader today in a similar fashion. Jesus immediately understands this man's motivation to be acknowledged as an important person.

Jesus counters with quoting the commandments, but with an addition. He adds, "You shall not defraud." Why would Jesus add to the Ten Commandments like this? As we find out later in the reading, this man is wealthy, a landowner who had many possessions. In the first century, the most common means of gaining wealth was by defrauding the poor. Thus, when Jesus commanded him to sell all he had and give it to the poor, Jesus was suggesting he give back what he had gained through fraud.

But, there is another dynamic at work here. Wealth gives power and influence. We see it in the news today. Often, rich people donate to political campaigns to gain influence over the candidate. Some things have not changed over the centuries. Selling all he had would cause this man to lose that power and influence he enjoyed. Hence, he left the conversation dejected. He could not have his wealth and power and attain eternal life.

Jesus did not despise this man. In fact, He looked with compassion on him and loved him, knowing the news Jesus had for him was not what the man wanted to hear. When Jesus said that it was hard for a wealthy person to enter the Kingdom of God, He was speaking contrary to the implied thought of the day - that wealth and good health were signs of divine favor. That was the source of the disciples' reaction. If the rich, those whose wealth showed them to be favored of God could not inherit eternal life, who could? None of us can by our own efforts according to Jesus. We must rely on God.

For once, Peter puts his finger on the correct interpretation of the situation. The disciples had given up everything to follow Jesus. They had walked away from their businesses, their livelihoods, and their families to wander the countryside with Jesus. Even the richest among them - Matthew - had given up all to follow Jesus. They had shown their reliance on God for their food and shelter. Yes, there were followers, especially some of the women, who provided for Jesus and the Twelve out of their own resources, but it was God who guided them.

Jesus ends this reading with a note of hope - that there would be a reward for those who left everything behind and followed Him. However, the rewards would come with a cost. There would be blessings and persecutions in this life. But, there would also be eternal life in the age to come. This is the same promise Jesus holds out for us.

Jesus reminds us in this story of the problems we face in this world. Money is not evil in itself. But, as people have abundant resources, they often lose sight of their reliance on God's grace to get them through. Dean Martin, the great entertainer, had the proper perspective on wealth. When someone admired his cufflinks, Dean took them off and gave them to the person. He said that when possessions mattered to him so much he could not give them away, they possessed him. Jesus asked the rich man to give away what he had, but those possessions owned him.

What do we have that we could not give away to follow Jesus? Where your treasures are, there your heart is also.