

30 October 2016

Faith Looks at Possessions
Mark 10:17-27; 2 Kings 22:3-7

We are physical people, and we own physical possessions, and we are followers of Christ. How do we put that together? How do we express our faith in a physical world? Well, here's one option, from Mark 10:17-29:

As he 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?' ¹⁸Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You 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; Honour your father and mother." ' ²⁰He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' ²¹Jesus, 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.' ²²When 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!' ²⁴And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It 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.' ²⁶They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' ²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'

Last week, I talked about a problem that we face as physical people who believe in a world beyond this physical one. On the one hand, we are spiritual beings – created in the image of God, who is Spirit. At the same time, though, we are physical beings, with physical bodies. Moreover, just as we have material bodies, we also own material things. How do we balance our physical selves with our spiritual lives? How do we live spiritually in our physical bodies and express our spiritual faith through our physical possessions?

Well, in this reading from Mark 10, we see one possible option: we can give up our material possessions so as to devote ourselves entirely to things of the spirit. Jesus tells this rich man that if he wants to follow him, then he should keep the commandments. The man says he does. Then Jesus says, "Great! Only one more thing. Sell everything you have and give it to the poor." When the man balks at that demand and leaves, Jesus says sadly to his disciples: *How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God . . . it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle . . .*

My guess is that everyone in this room who has a savings account is, like me, looking for a loophole, because we really don't want to go that route. But before we write it off, let me just say that this is a valid response to our problem, and it is based on something deeply true. The fact is, the more involved we get in the physical, material world, the harder it is to see beyond it to the spiritual reality of God. As a general rule, the richer we are, the harder faith becomes. This may be partly because when we're comfortable we don't feel our need for God so much. Faith

means depending on God, and if we have all we want, it's harder to remember that we still need God's grace. It may also stem from the fact that the more possessions we have, the more jealously we guard on them. This may not be true for everyone, but it seems that the more possessions we have the more possessive we get, and the more time and effort we devote to protecting what's *ours*. Possessiveness not help faith. And this much is definitely true: the richer we are, the less generous we are. It shouldn't be that way, but multiple studies in charitable giving confirm it. In terms of actual percentage of income, rich people give far less to help others than do poor people. Now the billionaire's gift of half a percent of his income will come to more dollars than the poor person's tithe, but that poor person is giving far more sacrificially. With all this in the background, we may understand Jesus' demand to the rich man: to follow Christ we must have faith, and wealth is a hinderance to faith.

So one way to express our faith through possessions would be to give them up, to separate ourselves from the physical world. And many have tried this approach. In the early days of there church there was a quasi-Christian movement called Gnosticism, which taught that the world itself was evil – *matter* is evil – and the only way to reach the Spiritual Realms was to renounce physical existence as much as possible, by celibacy, fasting, and so on. A similar teaching is held by Buddhism, that the way to enlightenment is to rid ourselves all physical desire. Christian monks, going back to the fourth century, have taken a vow of poverty. St. Francis founded an order of friars who gave up possessions and lived by begging. Throughout history, much of the deepest wisdom, greatest love, and broadest generosity have been shown by people following this path: St. Francis, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Teresa of Calcutta. There is in America today, a vital Christian movement sometimes called the “New Monasticism,” in which families are coming together in inner city communities, giving up their individual possessions to support each other and anyone else in their neighborhood who is in need. And one more time, this is valid.

But there are some problems with this approach, too. First of all, we have to reject the Gnostic-Buddhist notion that the physical world is evil. The Bible makes it clear from the start that matter is good. God made it and proclaimed it good. In the psalms we are instructed to rejoice in the delights of this world, in the grain and oil and wine and apple dumplings that give us pleasure. Second, on a practical note, most of the time those who take the path of renouncing possessions and joining monastic groups are only able to do so because the monasteries are supported by the larger Church. Which is supported by the tithes and offerings of other Christians who *actually earn money*. So we'd better not be saying that everyone should give up possessions. We'd have a problem soon. It's worth noting that Jesus didn't tell everyone he met that they had to sell everything they own, only this one man. And when the disciples asked him, “Well, if rich people can't enter the kingdom of God, who can?” Jesus replied, “Remember, all things are possible with God.”

So while separating ourselves from possessions may be a valid path, it's not the only one.

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If giving up all possessions is only one option, what other choices are there? We read now from the story of the boy king Josiah, who set out to use wealth to honor God. The reading is from 2 Kings 22:3-7:

In the eighteenth year of King Josiah, the king sent Shaphan son of Azaliah, son of Meshullam, the secretary, to the house of the Lord, saying, ⁴‘Go up to the high priest Hilkiah, and have him count the entire sum of the money that has been brought into the house of the Lord, which the keepers of the threshold have collected from the people; ⁵let it be given into the hand of the workers who have the oversight of the house of the Lord; let them give it to the workers who are at the house of the Lord, repairing the house, ⁶that is, to the carpenters, to the builders, to the masons; and let them use it to buy timber and quarried stone to repair the house. ⁷But no account shall be asked from them for the money that is delivered into their hand, for they deal honestly.’

Let me tell you about this king Josiah. He became king of Judah when he was a boy, after his father was assassinated. Unlike his idol-worshipping father and grandfather, Josiah was evidently raised to keep God’s covenant and worship only the God of Israel. When Josiah was eighteen, he decided to restore God’s temple as a sign of his faithfulness, and he made it a project for all the people of Judah. He took up a nation-wide special offering, handed it over to trustworthy workmen and restored the temple.

Now here’s a different approach to faith and possessions. Instead of giving them up, use them to glorify God. And this, too, is valid. Look around you. We are able to gather today, worshipping God in word and song (and handbell) at least partly because in the 1950s and 60s our fathers – many of them here today – raised money to build this building to honor God. Here we worship, we fellowship, we study and grow. Here we host recovery groups, ministries for people in crisis, Boy Scouts, senior citizen programs, gatherings for families of people with dementia, and square dancers. (I love this, by the way: step by step we are moving from being a church that sometimes lets people use our building to becoming a community center where people also worship God.) This is good, and none of it would be possible if people hadn’t given of their material possessions for the glory of God. It’s worth noting that the time of St. Francis and his vow of poverty was also the time of the building of the great cathedrals of Europe. And those, too, are powerful expressions of faith – expressing faith not by rejecting material things but by devoting them to God.

But there are problems with this approach to faith and possessions, too. Let me tell a little more about Josiah. After he restored the temple, he set about making laws requiring everyone to worship at *his* temple. Before Josiah, there had been smaller shrines to God scattered around Judah, but Josiah made it a crime to worship anywhere else. Then he rooted out all those who worshipped other gods, or who followed any occult practices. He “did away with” all magicians and fortune-tellers. It’s not clear what “did away with” means. Then he moved up to establish his religious reforms in the city of Bethel, which wasn’t even a part of Judah, so it was actually a religious conquest. Josiah’s generally considered a great hero of the Old Testament, but the more I read about where he went with his reforms, the more uncomfortable I get. And I’m not the only one. The prophet Jeremiah lived during the time of Josiah’s reforms, and he didn’t buy it. Jeremiah’s response to Josiah was this: “God’s people are deeply wounded, because they have

left their covenant with God. But you are only healing the surface of the wound. The deep, festering rot is still there” (Jeremiah 6, especially v. 14). Josiah may have started his reforms with the best of intentions – let’s assume he did – but everything he did took place in the physical world. It was all stuff that he accomplished by means of money and power, and it was all superficial. He got rid of obvious idolatry, and he made the temple very shiny. But it wasn’t enough. When people try to serve God exclusively by means of material things, it always ends up being about those material things instead of about God. Josiah started out a religious reformer and ended up trying to establish an empire for himself.

How do we live lives of faith as spiritual being in physical bodies, with our physical possessions? Well, we’ve looked at two different paths. First, there’s the path of turning inward and renouncing the material world. Second, there’s the path of turning outward and following God *through* our material possessions. Both paths are valid up to a point, but neither is enough by itself. To take the first path alone is frankly cowardly. We *are* physical creatures, and when we pretend that we are living lives of the spirit, untouched by sordid material things, what we’re really doing is resigning our responsibility to live in this world that God created. Perhaps we need a few to opt out and join monasteries, to remind us of the inner life, but most of us have to find a way to express our faith *through* our possessions, rather than apart from them. But be careful. The other extreme is, if anything, even more dangerous. When we neglect that inner life and try to express our faith entirely in terms of external stuff, we cast ourself adrift. We end up following God, but only skin deep.

No, somehow we have to find a middle way, a way to begin with a deep inner faith that expands outward, influencing how we conduct our physical selves and how we use our physical possessions. In two weeks, after next week’s All Saints service, I’m going to try to take that on, God help me. For today, let me just go back to the rich man who came to Jesus and say this: if we want to be followers of Christ, that means every part of us: mind, body, spirit, and possessions. We may not all be asked to give them up, but we *are* asked to make everything we have a witness to Christ instead of to ourselves.