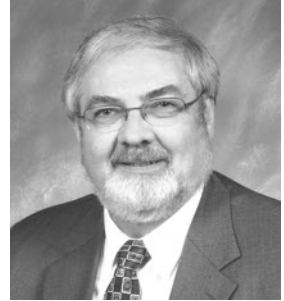


First Christian Church

(Disciples of Christ)
210 North Fifth Street
Ponca City, Oklahoma

The 19th Sunday after Pentecost
October 11, 2009

Job 23:1-9,16-17; Psalm 22:1-15
Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31
the Rev. Larry B Metzger, pastor



Last week Jesus addressed the issue of relationships, which I am very grateful to Roberta for her sermon and allowing me to attend Kathy's 50th class reunion. Today Jesus continues to challenge us by talking about something else we don't want to talk about: money.

I don't imagine any of us would want to be poor. To be poor is certainly a real problem, but neither is being rich the answer to a good life. There is really nothing wrong with have possessions or wealth.

I was taught there are two ways of being rich. One is to have all that you want. The other is to want all that you have.

This man who approached Jesus was missing something in his life and he came to Jesus because he believed Jesus had the answer. He had lived a good life and an upright and righteous life. However, something was still missing.

This is perhaps the point at which we may identify with the rich man. He had a sense of inadequacy. It is this inadequacy that Jesus saw; this was the man's weakness.

Jesus makes a first response to the man by refusing to be called 'good.' Jewish tradition reserves that name for God alone. He then moves the conversation from talking about human abilities, i.e., "what must I do," and capabilities, i.e., "good teacher" to the goodness of God and the commandments.

Jesus' command to give away everything he had to the poor was a shocking answer to the man. In first-century Judaism, while there were no scriptural prohibitions to keep the pious from giving away all personal belongings, there was "scribal legislation that restricted almsgiving to one-fifth of one's personal property (Kethubim 50a). This insured that the pious giver would not be reduced to poverty -- thus becoming another candidate for charity himself."

So Jesus was demanding more than the law required. It was a surprising demand.

Note if you will, something else. It really doesn't say the man was rich. That is implied by Jesus' response. It says he had many possessions.

In the world we live, even the poor may have many possessions. They may not be worth very much if they were sold, but many people, dare I say almost all of us have many possessions.

We live in a world that seduces us to have more and more.

Listen to this portion of an address by Roberto C. Goizueta, Chairman, CEO, Coca-Cola, delivered to the Executive Club of Chicago, November 20, 1996. (taken from Vital Speeches of the Day, January 15, 1997, p. 201.)

At the Coca-Cola Company, we have built and grown for more than 110 years. Remaining disciplined to our mission has brought us to remarkable places. Not long ago, we did some research and came up with an interesting set of facts.



A billion hours ago, human life appeared on Earth.

A billion minutes ago, Christianity emerged.

A billion seconds ago, the Beatles performed on The Ed Sullivan Show.

A billion Coca-Colas ago was yesterday morning.

And the question we are asking ourselves now is: What must we do to make a billion Coca-Colas ago be this morning?

This is the goal of most businesses: to get us to consume more and more, buy it, use it, become obsolete, throw it away and get more.

So the sad news is we don't have to be wealthy to be possessed by our possessions.

Jesus goes on to make the point, the more one has, the harder it is to be happy with one's lot.

Notice, the commandments are not all ten when he speaks to the man. Jesus does not list the first four but the six. Jesus says, "You shall not murder," [6th] "You shall not commit adultery;" [7th] "You shall not steal;" [8th] "You shall not bear false witness;" [9th] "Honor your father and mother." [5th]

When Jesus listed the commandments for this man in verse 19, he subtly altered the tenth. "You shall not defraud" or "rob" is a fairly unique interpretation of the 10th commandment prohibiting covetousness. For a man of many possessions or much land (the more

usual translation of ktemata pollan which is here "great wealth"), to defraud was more tempting than to covet.

This is very interesting. He makes an inquiry of these commandments of which the man could say he had kept them from his youth. They were not a problem for him, even defrauding or coveting. Jesus ask him about the commandments he had observed and thereby was kind and affirming of the rich man. These commandments are the ones dealing with relationships with one another.

He did not mention the first four which are about our relationship with God.

"You shall have no other Gods than me, [1st]; You shall not make yourself any idol, [2nd]; You shall not invoke with malice the Name of the Lord your God, [3rd]; Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy, [4th].



Jesus looked at this man with love.

He loved him. Because of this love, he tells him what he must do to repair the relationship with God.

The man is devastated because he had many possessions and did not want to give them up. Who would want to hear this kind of command? Not me. I enjoy my possessions. I even desire to have more. But if the master told us to give them up, would we?

The issues here, seems to be that the possessions have replaced God. They are the graven image, another name for God, caused him to not observe the Sabbath day or to keep it holy.

Harvard Medical School psychologist Steven Berglas has written a book called The Success Syndrome. He has found that individuals who in his word "suffer" from success have arrogance and a sense of aloneness. Insider trader Dennis Levine was asked by his wife why he needed the money from insider trading and he really had no answer. Levine says that when his income was \$100,000, he hungered for \$200,000, and when he was making \$1 million, he hungered for \$3 million. Berglas says that oddly enough people who find that \$200,000 did not make them happy never asked themselves why they thought \$300,000 would make them happy.

Asked to prescribe a cure for the success syndrome, Berglas said, "What's missing in these people (Ivan Boesky, Michael Milken, Leona

Helmsley) is deep commitment or religious activity that goes far beyond just writing a check to a charity." (King Duncan, Collected Sermons, www.Sermons.com)

Possessions are not bad. In fact, they are neutral. Wealth has the potential for great good. But it also has potential for great evil. Jesus said, "To whom much is given, much will be required." There is great responsibility that comes with great wealth. Perhaps this man could not deal with the responsibility and his relationship with God had been ruptured.

In February 1928, a female blue whale who roamed freely throughout the Antarctic for decades was killed. From measurements taken at the time, some scientists are convinced that she was the largest creature ever to have lived on Earth -- bigger than any known dinosaur or whale (leviathan).

But the people who had the privilege of seeing her never saw her. They were in such a hurry to harvest her blubber and find other family members of her huge species that they salvaged nothing -- not a single picture, not a single bone. Nothing. (Stephen Mills, "The Rhyming Whale," Review of Roger Payne's *Among Whales* [1996], *Times Literary Supplement*, September 6, 1996, 36.)

Money can do such wonderful things. It can send children to camp who would not be able to go; it can build affordable housing for people who never thought they could have a home in a safe environment; it can create programs to teach people about their Bibles; or give hope to those who thought there was no hope; it can build and unite; it has such great potential for good. But if we get caught up in the blubber we miss the beauty of the life changing and life giving possibilities.

This rich man had allowed himself to get caught up in the blubber. What should have been a great entrance of good things had become a door shutting him out of being a true disciple.

Because that was his great stumbling block, this is what he had to give up. Let each of us consider what is the stumbling block that is holding us back from full participation in the Realm of God; what is keeping us from being the Community of Faith God is calling us to be. May each of us give it up that we might enjoy the abundance of in Christ.

