

WPC
Rev. Ken Sunoo
Nov. 6, 2011 – Stewardship Sunday

Encounter With Grace
Mark 10:13-27; 12:28-34

What is it that God expects of us? Christ tells us in his memorable Sermon on the Mount: we're to be like salt; we're to be the light of the world; we're to be more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees if we're to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Now there's a challenge – to be more faithful than those significant religious leaders.

Jesus then clarifies just what it means to be a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. Over and over again Jesus repeats the phrase, “You have heard it said...but I say to you.” “You have heard it said ‘You shall not murder,’ but I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment.” You have heard what people have told you in the past, but now I'm telling you something more. Jesus demanded something extra.

Little wonder then that someone finally decided to ask Jesus directly, “What is it that you're really asking us to do? What is it that God really requires of us?” It's ironic that this question should come from a scribe, a stickler for detail, a teacher of the law, and in the context of the passage, perhaps someone who wanted to trap Jesus rather than truly seek more

clarity in what is required. Nevertheless, he asks, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?”

Jesus replied that everything rested on two key elements: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind – this is the greatest and most important commandment. The second commandment is like it: Love your neighbor as you love yourself. The teacher of the law heartily agreed with Jesus, “Yes, indeed. These things are far more important than burnt offerings and other sacrifices to God.” Jesus noted his wisdom and said, “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.”

Not far. I’m sure he and the others around him thought he’d knocked the ball out of the park, got a slam dunk, scored the winning touchdown. Yet this man hadn’t quite got it, though he was not far.

Scottish minister Robert S.T. Allan notes that, like his Sermon on the Mount, here too Jesus was looking for that something extra: “Even when one managed to boil it down to these two commands on which everything else depends, still there’s something more. It’s not another rule or regulation. It’s not something we can see or touch. It’s not something we can do or put in place. It’s a puzzle. On the face of it, we have things all wrapped up with these two greatest commandments, yet Jesus says, ‘Not far.’ What will it take to get us there? What extra is required? The search is

on.” (Robert S.T. Allan, sermon preached at Princeton Institute of Theology, 6/19/2000)

In our first passage this morning, we come across a man who asks the question, “Good teacher, what must I do to receive eternal life?” The word used for “good” can mean either good or kind, so it’s possible this account ties in to the prior incident where Jesus welcomes the little children. The man may have witnessed Jesus with the children and been struck by his kindness. So here it’s not a matter of trying to trap Jesus; it seems that this man is more curious to find out more about someone he admires.

Now it’s interesting how the gospels differ in their description of the question-asker here. Matthew says this was a young man; Luke calls him a ruler. So this is often referred to as the story of the “rich young ruler.” But Mark just calls him “a man.”

At any rate, Jesus answers the man by giving a brief narration of the 10 Commandments. Evidently, the young man interrupts him, “Teacher, all these I have observed from my youth.” But after being interrupted, Jesus gives an answer at last. Jesus looks at him and loves him, and then he says he lacks one thing – “go sell what you have, give it to the poor, and follow me.” By the way, notice that Jesus doesn’t say sell all you have and bring

the money to the church. Today is Stewardship Sunday, and perhaps that's a message you were expecting to hear.

But Jesus doesn't say sell what you have, bring it to me, and then my disciples will handle it in good stewardship fashion; no, he says to the young man, "Make sure you do good with your money. Give it to the poor. You be the steward! Give it to the poor, and you'll have treasure in heaven, and then come, follow me.

Well, the man was rather sad to hear this, and truthfully, who wouldn't be? Money may be one of those things you either have or don't have, but isn't it still better to have it? (Fiddler on the Roof – Tevye says to God, "Oh, dear Lord! You made many, many poor people. I realize, of course, it's no shame to be poor. But it's no great honor either. So what would have been so terrible if I had a small fortune?").

So this man went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. And here we have a great unfinished account. There's really no resolution – we don't know what eventually happened to this man. It's a mark of integrity for the New Testament – this was not a propaganda document. The church didn't change this story in such a way that this rich man returned and gave all his money to the poor and became a wonderful follower of Jesus Christ. We don't know what happened except that he went away in grief. Maybe he

did nothing, maybe he was sad because he knew he was going to sell all he had – we don't know.

What we do know is if this man gave up his wealth, he would not only be poor, he would be mixing socially with completely different people. He had much more to lose than just his money. And though I'm far from rich it doesn't appeal to me in today's world, and I suspect for you too, to sell everything I have and give it to the poor.

Yet I can't deny that giving away money seemed to work for that scoundrel of a tax collector named Zacchaeus. He gave away bags of the stuff, even paying back four times as much to those he had cheated. And Jesus declared, "Salvation has come to this house today." Zacchaeus gives away his wealth and he gets salvation.

Yet we know that salvation cannot be bought with gold and silver. There was something more – rich Zacchaeus found it, but it seems the other man didn't.

What is it that God requires of us? What is it above all else that God is expecting of us? "It's to love him, and to love our neighbors," and yet, Allen notes, "this requires more than lip service or knowledge or going through the motions. It requires that something extra – a continuing search of our hearts." (Robert S.T. Allan, PTS Institute of Theology, 6/19/2000)

Continuing is an important word. When we profess Christ as Lord we do much heart searching, but it doesn't end there. Nor does love end when two people get married – that's simply a point along a longer continuing journey. So too our Christian Education doesn't end after we become confirmed or join a church – in many senses it's just the beginning of lifelong learning.

To follow Christ is not a one-time decision, but a resolution to continually search our hearts for the love Christ requires of us. It's so easy for us to take God's love for granted and to assume that our hearts are right with him. Heart searching is required continually. And yes, that will affect our actions – how we use our time, talents, and money. Turns out this is a stewardship passage after all.

I believe that Zacchaeus undertook that search, and salvation came to his house, not just as a result of him generously giving away his money, but as a result of a heart that was touched and changed. And the man in Mark's story today went away with sadness when Jesus told him to sell everything and give it to the poor, for the search does bring us face to face with our real selves. The search brings us to the reality of what we really treasure in life. What is most important in our lives? What takes the highest priority? Is it

power? Our job? Our families? Our money? Or is it the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ?

Thankfully, this search is not something that we do alone. We have the community of faith that joins us on our journey. And we have God himself who accompanies us on our search, who is able to see past any barriers we put up to the truth.

It's a well-worn phrase, but the book should not to be judged by its cover. There's a story of a Scottish minister – on one visit to a home, he was met by a mother and her 4 year old son. The mother went to make a cup of tea in the kitchen, and the little boy sat in the lounge with the minister, and he sat at the other end of the couch. And the little boy said nothing, but stared intently at him. Eventually the little boy blurted out, “You're not good looking.”

Taken aback, the minister thought he'd make light of it. When the mother came back into the room, he said, “Your little boy was telling me I'm not good looking.”

“Oh, gosh,” said the mother, “You do get the truth from children, don't you.”

One rather deflated minister, but I think he was wise enough to realize that it's not the surface that matters. It's what's inside that's the key. It's

great to be generous, but is it generosity of the heart? Keeping the commandments as rules or regulations all of your life is commendable, but there's more to following and loving God.

Loving God is easy in a sense, for he loves us so much, and gives us so much. But it's not so easy in the sense that to really know and serve that loving God, Christ says to us, "Pick up your cross and follow me," and that is demanding. Loving our neighbors is easy, in a sense, for some are so nice, so supportive, so good to us. Not so easy in the sense that some are so selfish, so rude, so unloveable.

Again, the commandment itself is simple. It's following it that's hard. The difficulty is expressed in this rather honest prayer: Dear Lord, so far today I am doing all right. I have not gossiped, lost my temper, been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, or self-indulgent. I have not whined, complained, cursed, or eaten any chocolate. I have not charged anything on my credit card. However, I am about to get out of bed in a few minutes, and I will need a lot more help after that.

What is it that God requires of us above all else? To continually search our hearts for love, hour by hour, day by day. That is what is required of us; that is what God demands. With it, our faith is continually growing and our lives are enriched, never to be the same again. Amen.