

## Sermon: Pentecost 21B Oct. 13, 2024

Peace, Danville Pr. Lucy Kolin, preacher

Texts: Heb. 4:12-16, Mark 10:17-31

The Gospel is supposed to be **Good** News, right? But if you're like me, you may be finding it pretty hard to find in today's Gospel reading with its story of a man's disappointing encounter with Jesus, disciples worrying that their "yes" to following Jesus won't bring the rewards they'd hoped for, and everybody struggling with what it means to love and serve God.

Well, I won't pretend that there isn't great challenge in today's gospel reading but I **will** proclaim that there is **plenty** of hope **along with** that challenge and the promise – as always – of grace...amazing grace, available to all. That comes from today's **first** reading, which reminds us that when we've failed, lost courage, or just lost our way, we can come to Jesus and expect mercy, grace, and help. All is not lost. **We** are not lost. And we find that spelled out as today's gospel story continues to unfold.

But let's go back to the beginning, when a man comes running up to Jesus with a burning question. It's clear he doesn't want to miss this opportunity to receive the answer that will mean everything to him. Kneeling before Jesus, he asks, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responds, "You know the commandments." The man answers, "Teacher, I have kept these since my childhood."

Then Jesus, looking at him with love, says, "There is one thing more. Go and sell what you have and give it to those in need; then you'll have treasure in heaven. After that come and follow me."

It's clear this was not the answer the man expected...or wanted. So he went away, silently, and sad because he had many possessions. End of story. But no...and not just because Jesus and the disciples will unpack what just happened and what it means for **everyone** who follows Jesus.

First, we often say the man went away sad because he just couldn't imagine giving up everything he had...even for the prospect of eternal life or treasure in heaven. But we don't actually **know** if he went away sad because he **couldn't or wouldn't** do as Jesus proposed...or because he had decided...reluctantly that he would but was in shock about just how much following Jesus was going to change his life. To say "yes" to Jesus, to follow him involves not just our head but also our

heart and all our emotions. We don't know...but we can hope and imagine. Still it isn't easy what Jesus asks of us. So rather than judgment let us have compassion for the man in this story...it could be you or me.

But then, after the man left, Jesus spoke to the twelve, who'd obviously overheard the encounter. He said, "How hard it is for rich people to enter the kingdom of God! Why, it's harder than getting a camel through the eye of a needle!" -- which was probably an allusion to one of the city gates, the Needle's Eye. You can wonder if it was a matter of height or width or just the recalcitrance of a camel, but whichever it was, it would be difficult. "Well," said the disciples, sighing, "then who **can** be saved?" to which Jesus responded, "With human beings, it's impossible, but with God **all** things are possible." Jesus is reminding the disciples that discipleship and being a part of God's family is not a do-it-yourself challenge. It's an opportunity made possible by God, willingly, over and over again. Because discipleship is not an onward, ever upward activity. **And** he wanted them to reflect on the truth that the kingdom, membership and participation in God's community, is an inheritance given to all God's children. It's not something we earn...and in God's way of doing things, it doesn't differ in value depending on our age or rank or demonstrated loyalty. It's simply a gift...a gracious gift from the One who is our Abba and Imma, our Mother and Father, who loves to give us gifts. **And this** inheritance is not like the inheritances the **world** is used to: it's not about money or property or estates; rather it's the gift that is being claimed and called as a child of God, equal to every **other** child of God, and guaranteed not wealth or a better house in heaven or power and authority over others but rather the gift of being an everlastingly loved and treasured child of God – no better than any other – and the recipient forever of God's grace, God's love, God's forgiveness when we fail to be our best and truest selves, the children of God.

Of course, now we hear again from the disciples – as usual, Peter speaks for them all. They've already seen how difficult it is at times to follow Jesus and how others often reward them not with praise and riches but with scorn and ill treatment, not exactly the rewards they were hoping for. Peter wants Jesus to acknowledge this so he says, "Lord, we've given up **everything** to follow you." Or, maybe he meant us to accent **another** word in that sentence, "**we've**." Perhaps impressing on Jesus that, unlike the man who'd just walked away, **they** had left everything to follow.

But Jesus doesn't rush to sympathize. Instead he tries to help Peter and the others think about what their inheritance **is and does**. It gives them a community. It's not a gift meant to benefit only **them**. Rather it enrolls them in a worldwide, centuries-wide community of people, most of whom they would never know (and probably wouldn't accept if **they** were doing the enrolling!). And that means that Jesus' disciples then and now are called to use who they are and what they have – not just money or property but also “intellectual capital”, as Pastor John likes to put it and their physical abilities to create communities that look like God's **own** vision of community, one where everyone has enough, where we live to love and care for the earth and one other, and where sufficiency for all means abundance for all.

You, the members and friends of Peace, have discovered a lot of different ways to do this...and your generosity and creativity are beautiful to see.

But today I hope you will all stay to hear what faith-based community organizing, through Faith in Action International, is doing in Rwanda, Ghana, Tanzania, Kenya, and Namibia, in El Salvador, and in Haiti.

I'm thinking **especially** today of Mumeya in Rwanda, the first place I visited to experience Pr. John's organizing work. That was more than 15 years ago. On that first visit we drove in Pr. John's LandRover – there was no road into or out of the village – and my body felt every rock and rut!. There were no medical facilities...women who were having difficulties in childbirth or others who were critically ill had to be taken by boat on the river somewhere else to get care. Many died on the way. There was no market to buy or sell food. In the meeting we had in the church, I listened to the stories of those gathered, men and women and children. Then I asked, “How can you get what you need and deserve for your families, for your community?” They all pointed to me, meaning not just me but people from some other country sending money, supplies, building things and making decisions **for** them. But I replied, “No!” and pointed back to them. And you will see and hear in Pr. John's powerpoint today – and with your **own** eyes if you travel to Mumeya yourself -- the amazing things that have been accomplished by the brains and hands and muscles and voices and active participation of community members – young and old, women and men, boys and girls. And I think of people like Specioza and Ezra who first volunteered their time to learn how to organize and now are teaching others not just in Rwanda but in other countries how to do it and encouraging them that they **can** do it...so that the life

together of abundance and compassion God means **all** people to have can come to be...even against great odds.

In one of our traditional Offertory Prayers, we pray for strength to share “ourselves, our time and our possessions”. Jesus doesn’t want what we have to shut us off from our neighbors, because when we are shut off from neighbors, we are **also** shut off from **God**...who comes to us **in our neighbor**. And Jesus is asking us to remember that what we have, **our** wealth, is not just money. It’s also talent, muscle, the ability to work together to craft solutions to problems, to hold each other and those in power accountable, and to dream dreams of providing for not just **one** person or family but for a whole **community** the things that make for life and peace, health and opportunity.

Through your partnership with our South African brothers and sisters, you at Peace have learned about *ubuntu*, “I am because you are, you are because I am.” It’s the uniquely African way of restating what Jesus and his Abba declared the most important commandment: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. So today in our scripture and in Jesus’ **own** example of giving his all to draw all people to himself and also to each other, take heed and take heart from his words, from commitment to the cross...and from his promise to rise again and **continue** by his Spirit to encourage, equip, and renew our desire to be **true** disciples, making God’s vision of the family of God, the community of love, a reality on earth, not just in heaven. God grant this today for Jesus’ sake. Amen.