

Trinity 5 (Matthew 19:13-30)

Consider this attempt at writing a sermon based on our Second Lesson... When we compare ourselves to the rest of the world even the poorest people in the United States are rich, and we that are rich heard a frightening story this morning. A rich young man - and what appears to be a good young man - comes to Jesus and asks this question: "Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?" (Matthew 19:16) "Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me. But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions." When the young man left, Jesus said to His disciples: "That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 19:21-23) If that isn't bad enough, He goes on to tell them, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." (Matthew 19:24) Now it's time to go home after the world's shortest and most depressing sermon!

Maybe I better give it another shot if I want to see any of you next Sunday... You may have noticed at the beginning of our Second Lesson that there were some to which the kingdom of heaven belonged, some who were welcomed by Jesus. It was the children. He said, "... forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 19:14) The children are welcomed, but the rich young man goes away sorrowful. Let's take a look at what the rich man had or didn't have that caused him to turn away from the kingdom of God, and why the children were welcomed.

The first thing we notice about the rich man is that he was good. He doesn't murder, he doesn't commit adultery, he doesn't steal, and he doesn't bear false witness. Not only that, he honors his father and mother and he loves his neighbor as himself. The young man said, "All these things have I kept from my youth up:

what lack I yet?" (Matthew 19:20) We may wonder if this man is giving an honest assessment of himself, but we really have no reason to think that he wasn't a good man. We probably would have liked this rich, young, obedient man.

A group of unruly children, however, could be a different story, and this account leans even more in that direction because we see the disciples "rebuking" those who brought the children. They make an attempt to send the children away, but they never object to this polite young man. Perhaps the children aren't as well mannered or have trouble following the law that the young man claims to have mastered. Scripture certainly leads us in that line of thinking. The book of Proverbs speaks about the discipline needed to steer a child away from their selfishness. (Proverbs 22 and 23)

We also notice the rich man was full of promise and a child is full of need. In the setting of this chapter in Matthew, where Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees and teaching His disciples the adults may believe that children don't have much to offer. It's better to spend your time with the rich young man, full of potential and full of promise, but it was the children - unruly and full of need that are welcomed by our Lord, while the rich young man with all he had to offer went away sorrowful.

Another difference we notice is that the rich young man is strong and independent, while the children are weak and vulnerable. The rich young man walks up to Jesus and asks, "What good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?" The children don't come to Him on their own, they're "brought unto Him... that He should put His hands on them, and pray." (Matthew 19:13) The young man is looking for that good thing that he may do to have eternal life, but the children won't be doing anything but trusting Jesus. The children in their vulnerability learned to trust in another, while the young man is ready to rely on his own ability.

The rich young man didn't need to trust. He was doing just fine on his own. He was prosperous and well mannered. The question of, "What good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?" is like asking, "What else do I need to accomplish? What is the last box I need to check to be perfect?" The greatest danger that seems to accompany wealth and possessions is independence from God. The rich young man - well-behaved and self-reliant - seems to think he will be able to attain these riches in the kingdom of God as well. He was probably sought after by many, first on the invitation list to many a party, and well liked. Therefore, he naturally assumed, with all he had and all he had accomplished that God would be honored to have him in His company. The rich young man has forgotten that when he turns to God, he turns alone, not as a rich man, but just a man.

When you or I or the rich man look up to God, we don't look up as rich or poor, we simply look up as men and women, and alone before God this rich man's possessions and goodness don't look all that good. In front of God, what possessions could this man point to, to which God could not ultimately say, "I provided that for you." A bit like a little child standing in the house his parents bought, holding a toy bought by his parents arguing that this toy is actually his. No. The roof over your head, the toy in your hand, I provide these things for you. The book Deuteronomy (8:18) tells us: "Thou shalt remember the LORD thy God: for it is He that giveth thee power to get wealth . . ."

The richest man, when He stands before God, will look like the rest of us - full of need and completely vulnerable. In other words, he will look like a child. What good deeds will he have to show? What possessions could he point to? What could he have done on his own to merit the gift of eternal life? Nothing.

"In my hand no price I bring, simply to thy cross I cling."

This line makes you think about the kind of stance we take before

God as we turn to Him in faith and prayer. Are we like children - humble, full of need, and vulnerable? The question of a child is not the question of, "What do I need to do? What task do I need to accomplish?" The question of a child is, "What will you do for me, because I can't do anything for myself."

This is the stance we want to take before God, but too often our prayers sound like the rich young man. "God, I'm falling a little bit behind. Let me tell you what I'm going to do. I am going to work harder. I am going to read the Bible more. I am going to church every Sunday." There is nothing wrong with hard work or perfect attendance, but this is the stance of someone making a deal before God. "God, I'm going to do this for you, because it will lead to you doing something for me." I looked in our Book of Common Prayer, and I'm here to tell you... You won't find this type of prayer in that book. This is what you will find there:

O, GOD, forasmuch as without thee we are not able to please thee; Mercifully grant that thy Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts. (Trinity 19)

Consider this prayer:

Grant to us, Lord, we beseech thee, the spirit to think and do always such things as are right; that we, who cannot do any thing that is good without thee, may by thee be enabled to live according to thy will. (Trinity 9)

This is how a child prays - in need and complete dependence. "We, who cannot do any thing that is good without thee..." This is the posture of humble dependence, the posture of a child. So, we conclude that we are rich and wealth is dangerous. The question the rich man asked (What good thing shall I do?) will always be the question of a rich man, confident in his own ability to do the job - to check the box. This independence denies God our faith - the very thing it takes to please Him. (Hebrews 11:6) The

question the rich man asked (What good thing shall I do?) will always lead to frustration and futility, because we can't do anything on our own. The question of a child is not "What good thing shall I do?" but instead, "What will you do for me?" Our Lord and Savior answered that question on the cross. The question of eternal life is not about what we can do for Him, but what He has done for us.