

## 7.12.2020 Trinity 5 (Matthew 19:16-30)

We've all heard sayings like: you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours, one hand washes the other, and it takes two to tango. Expressions like these describe a transaction taking place between two people. To be clear, these well-known expressions are all examples of one person saying to another, "I'm doing this, because I expect to receive what I want in return." These sayings are so familiar because they're used by all kinds of people in all types of situations, but as common as they are, what I would ask you to consider today, what I hope we can agree on, is the truth that this kind of thinking has no place in the Christian life.

Christians don't relate to other people in a transactional way. We don't pick and choose who we will serve based on what we think they can give us in return, because we know that every person, from the beggar who lies at our gate to the rich man clothed in purple and fine linen (Luke 16:19-31), every person was created by God in His own *image* and *likeness* (Genesis 1:26). The Bible describes mankind as being distinctly different than the rest of creation because we bear the image of God, and one of the most fundamental ways we reflect His image is in and through our relationships.

Our Triune God is a relational being who has always existed in a perfect, personal relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, and as those created in His image, we are made to live in union and communion with Him and with one another. We prayed for such unity this morning by asking God that we may "be all of one heart, and of one soul, united in one holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and charity, and may with one mind and one mouth glorify thee..." When Christians live as they were made to live, in that kind of godly union, it's no longer possible to relate to another person in a transactional way, because when the many are all of one heart and one soul, when the many speak with one mind and one mouth, when the many are one body, what we find is that anything you do for another person you do for yourself, and anything you do to another person you do to yourself.

God made us to be relational, not transactional, and that's the truth I would ask you to keep in mind as we consider Jesus' encounter with the rich young man. In our Second Lesson this morning, this man approached Jesus and

asked the question, “*Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?*” (Matthew 19:16). God made us to be relational, yet time and again we approach this life, and even the next, in the same transactional way that this rich young man does when he asks, “*What good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?*” In other words, “I’m going to do what you tell me to do, because I expect to receive what I want in return.”

This rich young man seems to think that eternal life, everlasting communion with God in His heavenly kingdom, is something he can earn through his own good works, something he can expect to receive by being a good person. The Word of God makes it clear that he’s mistaken, but Jesus moves the conversation forward by telling him “*keep the commandments*” (Matthew 19:17). When the young man asks which ones, Jesus lists those commandments concerning his neighbor. He tells the young man, “*Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Honor thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself*” (Matthew 19:18-19).

By speaking specifically of the commandments that describe the moral responsibility this young man has to love his neighbor, our Lord is challenging him to change his transactional way of thinking. Notice the fact that Jesus doesn’t tell him, “If you keep all of the 613 ceremonial laws perfectly, then you will have eternal life.” Jesus doesn’t come up with some extreme challenge that once accomplished will earn the young man the reward he seeks. Instead of providing this man with a transaction to complete, Jesus provides him with people to love. Our Lord provides him with people to love simply by saying what God has always said through the Law and Prophets, “*Do unto others what you would have them do unto you...*” (Matthew 7:12). Love and care for your neighbor as you love and care for yourself. Turn away from your transactional way of thinking, because the kingdom of God is relational. In the kingdom of God mankind is united so intimately in one holy bond that anything you do for another person you do for yourself, and anything you do to another person you do to yourself.

As you know, the rich young man claims to have mastered the Law. He says to Jesus, “*All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?*”

(Matthew 19:20). The young man may have mastered the letter of the Law, but it appears he's failed to understand the spirit of the Law. These commandments were meant to bring this young man into a loving, self-sacrificing relationship with his neighbor, but instead of allowing that to happen, this rich young man clings to his wealth, places his trust in his riches and possessions, and lives a life of prideful independence.

It's wealth that prevents this rich young man from entering into a loving relationship with his neighbor, and what makes that situation infinitely worse is the fact that a person who doesn't love their neighbor cannot love God. As St. John writes, "... *whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen*" (1 John 4:20). Wealth and possessions are the stumbling block that keeps this rich young man from communion with God and neighbor, and this is exactly why Jesus says directly to 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*" (Matthew 19:21).

*Come and follow Me.* You may remember that in our New Testament reading two weeks ago, Jesus said the same words to a sinful man named Matthew as he sat at his tax collector's table. *Follow Me.* My friends, God is calling out to each and every one of us, from the sinful tax collector to the Law abiding rich young man. He's inviting us all to turn away from the self-serving transactions that take place in this world, to the end that we may enter into a personal, self-sacrificing relationship with Him and with our neighbor, yet as we read this morning, not everyone responds to His call.

When Jesus spoke those words to Matthew, St. Matthew "*arose and followed Him*" (Matthew 9:9), yet when Jesus said the same words, in the same way, with the same grace to the rich young man "*he went away sorrowful*" (Matthew 19:22). The young man chose wealth and possessions, the world and himself instead of God, and a person can't help but wonder at the thought of the sinful tax collector being the one who responded to God's call, while the Law abiding young man, who came to Jesus seeking eternal life, went away sorrowful. Some questions will have to be left unanswered, because only God knows the heart (1 Kings 8:39), but one thing we can say that provides some understanding concerning the thought of these men

responding so differently to Jesus' call to follow Him is this, once again, we were made in the *image* and *likeness* of God. We were created by God to be relational, not transactional, and to enter into a loving relationship requires the freedom to say yes, or no.

Those who bear the image of God are free, and we can use our freedom to love our neighbor as ourselves, or we can use our freedom to pick and choose who we will serve based on what they can do for us. We can use our freedom to love God because He loves us and "*gave Himself up for us*" (Ephesians 5:2), or we can use our freedom to serve Him based on what we expect to receive from Him. This is our challenge today, and every day in this fallen world, to turn away from a transactional way of thinking, and to enter into a relationship. To love and care for our neighbor as we love and care for ourselves, and to love God, not so He will love us, but because He loves us.