

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church – November 22, 2020

Hymns: 438 – When morning gilds the skies; Lord, you are more precious than silver; 637 – Take My Life And Let It Be Consecrated; Jesus, All for Jesus

Scripture: Deuteronomy 8:6-20; Mark 10:17-27

Sermon Title: The Trouble with Money

Deuteronomy 8:6-20 (CEV – Selected verses)

Obey the commands the LORD your God has given you and worship him with fear and trembling. The LORD your God is bringing you into a good land with streams that flow from springs in the valleys and hills. You can dig for copper in those hills, and the stones are made of iron ore. And you won't go hungry. Wheat and barley fields are everywhere, and so are vineyards and orchards full of fig, pomegranate, and olive trees, and there is plenty of honey...

But when all this happens, don't be proud! Don't forget that you were once slaves in Egypt and that it was the LORD who set you free...

When you become successful, don't say, "I'm rich, and I've earned it all myself." Instead, remember that the LORD your God gives you the strength to make a living. That's how he keeps the promise he made to your ancestors. But I'm warning you—if you forget the LORD your God and worship other gods, as the nations the Lord makes to perish before you, so you shall perish, because you wouldn't listen to the Lord your God's voice.

Mark 10:17-27 (NLT)

As Jesus was starting out on his way to Jerusalem, a man came running up to him, knelt down, and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Why do you call me good?" Jesus asked. "Only God is truly good. But to answer your question, you know the commandments: 'You must not murder. You must not commit adultery. You must not steal. You must not testify falsely. You must not cheat anyone. Honor your father and mother.'"

"Teacher," the man replied, "I've obeyed all these commandments since I was young."

Looking closely at the man, Jesus felt genuine love for him. "There is still one thing you haven't done," he told him. "Go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

At this the man's face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions.

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God!" This amazed them. But Jesus said again, "Dear children, it is very hard to enter the Kingdom of God. In fact, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!"

The disciples were astounded. "Then who in the world can be saved?" they asked.

Jesus looked at them intently and said, "Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But not with God. Everything is possible with God."

This story we read from the Gospel of Mark is often called "The Rich Young Ruler." And you know, I feel I have a lot in common with the Rich Young Ruler.

Not that I'm rich. That is to say, not by the standards of our society – by Canadian standards, I'm right there with what is called Median Income. But by any other standards, or in any other timeframe of our planet, I am rich. But statistically, anyway, not here.

Nor am I young. That is to say, not by the standards of our society. In terms of the average age of our congregation, I suppose many of you would still consider me young. But only if you're old!

Nor am I a ruler. That is to say, I do have certain responsibilities of leadership and oversight, but compared to, say, the PEI Minister of Environment, Forestry, Public Works and Municipal Sewage, well, many people wouldn't put me in that class.

So maybe I'm not young. Or rich. Or a ruler. But I feel as though our story's Rich Young Ruler and I have a lot in common nonetheless. It turns out that we both believe, him and me, that we need God. That our lives, ultimately, belong to God. But it also turns out we also both believe, him and me, that money is our true source of security. I didn't think so, until I was excited to receive in the mail an update regarding my prospective pension income. I went over this information with a level of attention and concern which told me that while I may not be in the same financial snack bracket as the rich young ruler, we both look to money as the source of our security and well-being. And that's a problem.

At least the rich young ruler knows that despite his life of religious obedience, despite following the commandments, despite having youth and power and wealth – "great wealth," says Mark – despite all that, he knows that there is something missing, there is something wrong. There is something standing between him and God. Listen to how the story starts:

As Jesus was walking down a road, a man ran up to him. He knelt down, and asked, "Good teacher, what can I do to have eternal life?"

So far, in the Gospels, the rich and powerful people haven't been ignoring Jesus. They often invite him to dinner, or send servants to ask if he might come and visit. But this fellow runs up to Jesus, and falls on his knees before him. This is not how the wealthy and powerful act, then or now. This rich young ruler is hurting, is desperate; again, the rich young ruler knows that despite his life of religious obedience, despite following the commandments, despite having youth and power and wealth, there is something missing, there is something wrong. There is something standing between him and God.

As Jesus was walking down a road, a man ran up to him. He knelt down, and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus looks at the young man, and, we're told, loved him. He reacts with compassion to this sincere recognition of need. And he decides to lead the Rich Young Ruler on a voyage of spiritual discovery. Jesus is going to help him discover just what it is standing between him and God; between him and eternity; between him and peace in his heart. Jesus says,

"You know the commandments. 'Do not murder. Be faithful in marriage. Do not steal. Do not tell lies about others. Do not cheat. Respect your father and mother.' "

The man answered, "Teacher, I have obeyed all these commandments since I was a young man."

I've been a good boy, says the man. I've followed the rules. I've lived an honest life. Ever since I was this high. But there is still something. I feel it. I know it. I'm still worried. I'm still not where I know I should be. There is still something between me and God.

Looking closely at the man, Jesus felt genuine love for him. "There is still one thing you haven't done," he told him. "Go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

Jesus, we read, "*looked closely at the man.*" Jesus, we read, "*loved him.*" And looking closely at him – looking into his heart – and loving him enough to reveal to him just what it was at the centre, at the very core of him, that was standing between him and God, Jesus makes an astonishing offer.

"Sell it all. Give it all away. Give it to the poor. Invest it all in heaven. Then, come with me. Be with me. I'll be your saviour. Follow me."

And here's the man's problem, so helpfully and compassionately perceived by Jesus. The Rich Young Ruler knew he needed God. That's why he was careful to follow all the rules. He believed there is a God, he believed there is a particular way of living which God has prescribed. The Rich Young Ruler knew he needed God. He didn't know he needed a Saviour.

Jesus, you see, came into a world which had a profound belief in the existence of God. His world needed no convincing of that. In fact, if someone had said, "There is no God," people would have considered them insane. Nor did his world need convincing that there was a way of living, a set of rules, by which you pleased that God. Everybody knew that. Jesus' own Jewish people knew that all too well, with 613 rules governing their every waking moment. The Pharisees, guardians of those rules, kept a close eye on Jesus and his disciples to make sure they were following every one of them, and often took them to task when they weren't. And the others in the land, the Romans and the Greeks and the Syro-Phoenicians and the rest, they all had their own gods, and their own rules which they followed. No one needed convincing about God, or about rules.

But Jesus knew, which many didn't, that everyone needed something more. Everyone needed a Saviour. Deep down inside, the Rich Young Ruler knew that too. That's why he ran to Jesus, and fell on his knees. And what Jesus said to him, is something we are all afraid he just might say to us. Jesus looked at him closely, and loved him, and said, *"You know about the rules, and that's good. You need those rules to live your life in a meaningful way. But you also know you need something more. You need a Saviour. And it isn't money. No matter how much of it you have, your money won't save you. Money isn't your Saviour. I am. You need me. Give away your false Saviour – give away your money – and follow me. Come with me. I'll be your Saviour. Follow me."*

Scary words. After all, money is useful. Money is more than useful; money, as the song goes, makes the world go around - the way we've made our world to be, anyway. And because of the way we've set up our world to work, money is so important that it can all too easily become to us that which is more important than anything else. It can all too easily become our source of security, of self-worth, our self-identity. The trouble with money is, it can all too easily become our saviour. So much so, that given the choice between his wealth and the Saviour, the Rich Young Ruler blew it. He put his money on the wrong horse. He did this:

Jesus looked closely at the man. He loved him and said, "There's one thing you still need to do. Go sell everything you own. Give the money to the poor, and

you will have riches in heaven. Then come with me." When the man heard Jesus say this, he went away gloomy and sad because he was very rich.

Faced with the choice of unending love, peace of heart, and fullness of joy with Jesus, the young man chose gloom and sadness and wealth. Bad choice. While it is true that it is better to be miserable and rich than miserable and poor, it is infinitely better to have unending love, peace of heart, and fullness of joy with Jesus. It is infinitely better to know you need a Saviour, than to think you've managed to construct one of your own, one dollar at a time. Money is so persuasive, so powerful, that it can actually come between us and God, can actually prevent us from reaching God's Kingdom.

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "It's hard for rich people to get into God's kingdom!" The disciples were shocked to hear this. So Jesus told them again, "It's terribly hard to get into God's kingdom! In fact, it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to get into God's kingdom."

Why are the disciples shocked? Because in their experience, rich people can do anything they want, get anything they want, go anywhere they want. And while that may be somewhat true of this world which money makes go round, it ain't true of heaven. *"It's terribly hard to get into God's kingdom! In fact, it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to get into God's kingdom."* Why? Because there is one way, and only one way to get to Heaven. We need a Saviour. And not one made of money. Because you just can't make your own Saviour. You need the one who comes to you. You need the one who looks closely at you, and loves you (anyway), loves you enough to say, "Your money won't save you. Don't let that get in the way. Use it for good, use it to bless the poor. Invest in heaven. And follow me." Timothy Keller, in King's Cross, sees it this way:

When Jesus called this young man to give up his money, the man started to grieve, because money was for him what the Father was for Jesus. It was the centre of his identity. To lose his money would have been to lose himself – to lose what little sense he had of covering up his own deep inner need.

It is one thing to have God as a boss, as an example, as a mentor; but if you want God to be your Saviour, you have to replace what you're already looking to as a Saviour.

Money has always been one of the most common Saviours. How do you know that money isn't just money to you? Here are the signs: You can't give large amounts of it away. You get scared if you have less than you're accustomed to having. You see people doing better than you, even though you

might have worked harder or been a better person, and it gets under your skin. And when that happens, you have one foot in the trap. Because money for you is no longer just a tool; it's the scorecard. It's the life preserver. It's your identity. It's your Saviour. No matter how much money you have, though it is not intrinsically evil, it has incredible power to keep you from God."

That's the trouble with money. It is a problem as old as our world. In that Deuteronomy reading from earlier, the people were on the verge of the promised land. "You'll have everything you need," said God. *The LORD your God is bringing you into a good land with streams that flow from springs in the valleys and hills. You can dig for copper in those hills, and the stones are made of iron ore. And you won't go hungry. Wheat and barley fields are everywhere, and so are vineyards and orchards full of fig, pomegranate, and olive trees, and there is plenty of honey.*

But don't forget you need a Saviour. *Don't forget that you were once slaves in Egypt and that it was the LORD who set you free. When you become successful, don't say, "I'm rich, and I've earned it all myself." Instead, remember that the LORD your God gives you the strength to make a living.* You just can't get to the Promised Land all on your own. You need the Saviour to get there.

The disciples forgot. *They asked each other, "How can anyone ever be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "There are some things that people cannot do, but God can do anything."* You can't do it on your own. There are some things that people cannot do. You need God, who can do anything. That's the trouble with money. It can convince you that it is all you need. Given enough money, you may think you have everything you need. You may forget that you still need a Saviour.

The Rich Young Ruler forgot. And I forgot, too. We have that in common, him and me. Maybe you do, too. Maybe you're content with following the rules, and with masking any deeper inner need with the security you derive from your possessions, your efforts, your wealth. But don't forget you need a Saviour. And don't forget there's only one. And he looks closely at you. And he loves you. He loves you enough to say, *"Your money won't save you. Don't let that get in the way. Use it for good, use it to bless the poor. Invest in heaven. And follow me."*

Will you walk away in gloom and sadness, or will you open your life to unending love, peace of heart, and fullness of joy? Which Saviour will you choose? Choose carefully, and choose well. There is, after all, only one real Saviour. Amen.