In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text speaks of the rich man and his important question. In Mark 10:17 we read this:

And as he [Jesus] was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10:17, RSV)

Eternal life! A sweet phrase!

In the first draft of this sermon, I referred to this fellow as “the rich young man.” But St. Mark does not actually refer to him as young. So I had to go through the sermon again and remove reference to his youth. Why did I think him young? Perhaps because our text says that he “ran up and knelt before [Jesus], and I figure that if he ran, then he was probably young, since I don’t much feel like running anymore. But, you know, upon reflection, I am glad that St. Mark did not refer to him as young. The issue this text places before us is not just for the young. We might have grey hair and walk along slowly, but still, it is time for us to consider the things that are central to our lives. I hope you will count Jesus and this congregation too as being central to who you are.

You know how the story turns out: The man cannot bring himself to follow Jesus under the terms Jesus lays down. And so the fellow goes away. The final words of his story go this way:

22At that saying his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions. (Mark 10:22, RSV)

The theme of my sermon this morning is simply this: The rich man’s question does not go away. The man himself goes away sorrowful from Jesus, but his question follows him. His question persists. In a busy world, in which it is easy to become distracted and preoccupied with many matters, we should not let the devil deprive us of this fundamental question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Eternal life! An important subject. And then we should so order our lives that they cohere with our thoughts about eternal life.
I hasten to give you the answer about eternal life. When you think of eternal life, think of Jesus and let it be your firm intention to walk with him, to trust him, indeed, to become as much like him as you can in this earthly life. Then leave eternity to him. That will be safe, for Jesus is trustworthy.

There is a certain detail in our opening text that I would like to lift up. At first it sounds like a simple passing comment. The words go this way:

And as he [Jesus] was setting out on his journey... (Mark 10:17, RSV)

The word I am thinking about it is “journey.” It means the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem. In St. Mark’s Gospel, the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem means his death—his death on the cross. It is not a casual thing when St. Mark says that Jesus is setting out on his journey. It means that Jesus is drawing closer to his death. He is not turning away. He is not abandoning his path. Each step on that journey brings him closer to the cross.

Now Jesus invites this rich man to join him on his journey. What Jesus had earlier said to his twelve disciples he now says to this man:

...come, follow me. (Mark 10:21, RSV)

Precious words! A holy invitation, also extended to you and me when we are baptized.

This fellow could have joined the apostolic band. Jesus invites him. Who knows? He might have become a faithful and revered disciple of Jesus. He might have been loyal to Jesus even in Gethsemane when the guards were coming to arrest Jesus. But we will never know the kind of disciple he could have been because the rich man does not follow Jesus. He turns and walks away. The story of his life could have been great and holy, but he chooses a more normal life. He chooses to go on without Jesus.

His problem seems to have been that Jesus specified the cross he wanted the rich man to bear. Already in St. Mark’s Gospel Jesus has spoken of the cross not only for himself but also for those who would follow him. And so we read this in Mark Chapter 8:

And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. (Mark 8:34, KJV)

These are stirring words, and it is part of the joy and adventure of our life in Christ to try to figure out what they mean for us personally. In general I think we must say that in any competition between Jesus and other things, we
should choose Jesus. His words about the cross are wide-ranging for anyone who would follow him. But they do not always pin people down in exact ways. We must use our judgment and Christian integrity in figuring out what it means for each of us to take up our cross and follow Jesus.

Not so in the case of this rich man. Here Jesus specifies a path for the fellow. He must choose between his possessions and Jesus. Note, my friends, that Jesus might not be asking that of you. At least, if you think Jesus is asking you to sell your possessions and give to the poor, that is the kind of matter that you should discuss with your brothers and sisters in the church. For you and me, ordinarily we do not know with certainty that Jesus wants us to sell our possessions and give to the poor. But in the case of this rich man the case is certain. Jesus speaks to the man in a forthright way:

21And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” (Mark 10:21, RSV)

Jesus is not being mean when he asks this of the rich man. As the sacred text says, Jesus looked upon him with love. We should believe that it was out of this love that Jesus asked this man for this particular sacrifice. I wish the man had agreed to it. I would love to have seen the good he would have done as a disciple of Jesus. And I would have loved to see the abundant life that Jesus would have given this man. Jesus never intends to strip us bare and leave us bereft of blessings. Jesus always comes that we might have life and have it more abundantly (John 10:10). But this rich man cannot bring himself to do what Jesus clearly asks him to do.

Martin Luther has a lovely saying in his Large Catechism about the First Commandment—that is, the commandment that we should have no other gods but the true God. He is talking about the potential for us to be drawn too much to the things of life. He is talking about our potential to give our hearts away too much to the things of this earth. Luther does not want this for us. In the midst of life with its many lovely and useful things, Luther wants it to remain clear for us that we love the Lord above all else. His words go this way:

Therefore, let us learn the First Commandment well, so that we see that God will tolerate no presumption or trust in anything else; he makes no greater demand on us than a heartfelt trust in him for every good thing, so that we walk straight ahead on the right path, using all of God’s gifts exactly as a shoemaker uses a needle, awl, and thread for his work and afterward puts them aside, or as a
traveler makes use of an inn, food, and lodging, but only for his physical needs. Let each person do the same in his or her walk of life according to God's order, allowing none of these things to be a lord or an idol.

Luther wants us to walk straight ahead, enjoying the things of his creation, but not letting them become idols—not letting them distract us from that which is central in life for us.

It is Stewardship Sunday here at Immanuel Lutheran Church. I feel a duty to speak of financial support of our congregation — at least a few sentences now. In my mind, it gets down to this: I hope that in true and unmistakable fashion we will so structure our household budget that it will be clear to God, to others, and to ourselves that Jesus Christ and his church are very important to us. Generations of Christians have so arranged their lives that they have tried to give a tithe - that is, 10% - of their income to the church. Carol and I try to live by that discipline and I hope you will too. It might take you a good long while to actually reach that level—perhaps years depending on your individual circumstances. But try to make some progress toward it even now. Jesus has loved us for a long time now. Let us give to the church in such a way as to express that we love him too.

I end by returning to the rich man in today’s Gospel story. The concluding words to the man’s story go this way:

22 At that saying his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions. (Mark 10:22, RSV)

And that is all St. Mark wrote. We know no more of this man's life. I hope it was a good life. I hope he had his treasures on earth, for it looks that he turned away from treasures in heaven. *That* is what I do not want for you and me. On this Stewardship Sunday, I find it on my heart to say to us, let us not turn away from our treasures in heaven. Let us keep first things first. Let us seek simplicity and to try to focus on that which is central in life. I mean Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.