

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, May 15, 2024
Matthew 19:16-30
Is It Time to Back Off?

HOLY GOSPEL..... Matthew 19:16-30, RSV
*Last week we read the teaching of Jesus about divorce. Also, he blessed the little children.
Now we read about the Rich Young Man.*

Before the Gospel:

☐ The Holy Gospel according to Saint Matthew, the Nineteenth Chapter:

☑ **Glory to you, O Lord.**

¹⁶And behold, one came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?" ¹⁷And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? One there is who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." ¹⁸He said to him, "Which?" And Jesus said, "You shall not kill, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, ¹⁹Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ²⁰The young man said to him, "All these I have observed; what do I still lack?" ²¹Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." ²²When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions.

²³And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." ²⁵When the disciples heard this they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" ²⁶But Jesus looked at them and said to them, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." ²⁷Then Peter said in reply, "Lo, we have left everything and followed you. What then shall we have?" ²⁸Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹And every one who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life. ³⁰But many that are first will be last, and the last first.

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

Earlier in St. Matthew's Gospel — back in Matthew 12 — we read of some Pharisees who posed a question to Jesus. In that way, they were similar to the rich young man in this evening's reading. His question was about eternal life:

“Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?”
(Matthew 12:16, RSV)

Their question back in Chapter 12 was about healing on the Sabbath day:

¹⁰And behold, there was a man with a withered hand. And they asked him, “Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath?” so that they might accuse him. (Matthew 12:10, RSV)

Both the Pharisees back then and the rich young man in this evening's reading ask a question of Jesus. Yet there is a very different spirit at play in these questions. The folks back in Matthew 12 have ill will toward Jesus. The text says that they asked their question “that they might accuse him.” And when Jesus goes ahead and heals the poor man with the withered hand, his questioners become enraged and resolve to kill Jesus. And so we read of them:

¹³Then [Jesus] said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, whole like the other. ¹⁴But the Pharisees went out and took counsel against him, how to destroy him. (Matthew 12:13-14, RSV)

Not so our young man. He comes with good will toward Jesus. He comes with an honest question. And when the answer is too hard for him, he goes away sorrowful. He goes away, not accusing Jesus, but accusing himself, as if he knew that in the critical moment, he was falling short of a standard he himself believed in:

²²When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions. (Matthew 19:22, RSV)

This gives us a chance to consider the tyranny of riches. We human beings are capable of being bewitched by wealth, of throwing ourselves down at its feet and making ourselves its servants. The young man has asked a question about “eternal life.” Surely, such life is more valuable than all the gold and silver and the cattle on a thousand hills. And yet the young man chooses his wealth and walks away sorrowful.

In this sermon I mean to consider the pursuit of wealth, but let me begin by saying that there is much to admire in this rich young man.

First off, we have here a serious young man. He comes to Jesus with an important question — a question about eternal life. Another person might have put off that question to old age, when the threescore and ten years are drawing to their close. Or another person might never have reckoned with the question at all, but remained so focused on earthly matters as to be oblivious to the state of his soul. But not this young man. When other young people might have been immersed in matters of sport or romance or building a career, this young man remains conscious of the divine dimension of life. He does not come to Jesus to discuss the weather. He comes to discuss eternity. I like him for that.

Second, I admire him for his piety. This young man is a good neighbor. He is a good citizen of the city. No murder for him, no theft, no adultery. He knows the holy commandments and he abides by them. Jesus does not dispute this. Jesus only asks for something more.

And finally I admire this young man for the fact that he “has great possessions.” Note the present tense of the verb. He “has” them. He is not like the younger son in the parable of the prodigal son who marches off into a far country and there “squandered his property in loose living” (Luke 15:13). Both young people and old people who ought to know better are vulnerable to this — to squandering their wealth in loose living. But not this young man. He is a man of discipline, and I like him for this too.

But, alas, he is too much under the spell of riches. He is being whipped around by wealth. You and I do not have the same clear promise that this young man has. Jesus has not so clearly said this to us:

²¹Jesus said to him, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” (Matthew 19:21, RSV)

I mean, we must be careful of what Luther called “self-chosen good works.” Is Jesus really calling you, calling me, to sell what we possess and give to the poor? Maybe yes, maybe no. St. Francis believed himself called to this path, and he certainly seems to have been right. But for many of us, the matter is uncertain. Indeed we might feel that Jesus is calling us to keep our wealth and to use it for good deeds, including the good deeds of taking care of ourselves, our loved ones, and the commonwealth. But the case was different for this young man. For him, Jesus stands right before him and clearly gives him a promise:

...you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.
(Matthew 19:21, RSV)

Even if the first part were uncertain... even if Jesus had not clearly promised "treasure in heaven," still, the second part was enough all by itself to make for a good and blessed life:

... come, follow me [says Jesus].

This is what Jesus had said to Peter and Andrew, James and John at the start of things. These were the very words of Jesus to them, "Come, follow me." Jesus is inviting this young man into discipleship. He is inviting him into the divine fellowship.

But the young man turns and walks away. Why? Because he has "great possessions." This story is a caution for us about a great and powerful idol in life. I speak of money.

So, let me ask us a question: Is it time for us to back off from the pursuit of wealth? I do not insist that it *is* time. There are legitimate things to take into account even for Christians. For example, do we already have enough wealth by many reasonable standards or are we still just scraping by? What about our particular responsibilities in life? We might be poor by the standards of the world, and yet that might be okay with us because our desires are simple and we do not have others to take care of. On the other hand, we might have high responsibilities in life and need quite a lot of money to handle those responsibilities. Perhaps some of us should probably be more concerned with wealth, so that we will not become destitute when we get old and so that we can help take care of others along the way.

So, I think there is no sure answer to the question about whether it is time for us to back off from the pursuit of wealth. And yet, this evening's Gospel Lesson is important for us. In this evening's Lesson, we are listening to the voice of our Good Shepherd, guiding us along into fullness of life.

The thing to learn from this evening's story is that wealth can be insatiable. If we are not careful, we will never get enough wealth. We will always be left panting for more. Even if we have gathered much more than most of our neighbors, we are capable of feeling restless for more. Indeed, this evening's story poses the dreadful possibility for us that if Jesus himself stood before us and asked us to sell our possessions and give to the poor, we would find ourselves unable to do so. Madness! If we think about it calmly, it is insane to turn and walk away from Jesus for all the money in the world. But we must beware. Money is a powerful, powerful lure in life.

Having lots of money is no guarantee of a happy life. On the other hand, it is possible to have a happy life without being rich. Porgy knew this. Right? He sang

of it in Porgy and Bess. His song "I Got Plenty Nothing" actually has some profound points in it. Let me lift up two verses:

[PORGY]

Oh, I got plenty o' nuttin'
An' nuttin's plenty fo' me
I got no car, got no mule, I got no misery
De folks wid plenty o' plenty
Got a lock an dey door
'Fraid somebody's a-goin' to rob 'em
While dey's out a-makin' more
What for?

Here, Porgy is pointing out that folks with plenty of money might not be enjoying life as much as we would think. They might be preoccupied with matters of security, with the lock on the door, with ebbs and flows in the stock market, with trying to squeeze out tax advantages, with worries about their families ... worries because they tend to neglect their family as they spend so much time earning and investing more money and can hardly keep themselves from it.

And then Porgy goes in the other direction. He says that it is possible for a poor man, a poor woman to be happy. And so he sings this with his great baritone voice:

I got no lock an de door
(Dat's no way to be)
Dey kin steal de rug from de floor
Dat's okeh wid me
'Cause de things dat I prize
Like de stars in de skies
All are free

And then he ends up by speak of his Lord. He speaks of his gal, yes, but also of his Lord:

Oh, I got plenty o' nuttin'
An' nuttin's plenty fo' me
I got my gal, got my song
Got Hebben de whole day long!

No use complainin'!
Got my gal, got my Lawd, got my song¹

So, that's Porgy.

St. John Chrysostom puts both points together in a few words. He does not want us to displace “treasures in heaven” with “treasures on earth.” So I end with his exhortation:

Therefore that we may not have superfluous sorrows, let us forsake the love of money that is ever paining, and never endures to hold its peace, and let us remove ourselves to another love, which both makes us happy, and hath great facility, and let us long after the treasures above.²

These are the treasures to which Jesus invites us — the treasures above, the treasures in heaven. And to this wealth-offering Savior be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

¹ <https://genius.com/George-gershwin-i-got-plenty-o-nuttin-lyrics>

² Chrysostom, homily on our text, Matthew 19:16ff.