**St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church**

**Proper 23**

**Year B**

**Job 23: 1-9, 16-17**

**Psalm 22:1-15**

**Hebrews 4:12-16**

**Mark 10:17-31**

**Divine Inheritance**

When you grow up in a small Norman town in Wales, you get used to old things….places with names like Symonds Yat, a place as old as time with a view of the River Wye and the Wye Valley as far as the eye can see. As a child, it seemed to belong to only me, but today it has become a destination point for people from all over the world who come to enjoy it. It’s like an inheritance from God. Or the old church built in 1066 to which people come every Sunday in response to the old bells that still call them to worship…all welcome to inherit the sense of the Holy that has been indelibly prayed into the thick stone walls for a 1,000 years. Or an old stone castle or home passed down through the centuries family to family….or old furniture, like a table that I have in my home, which I inherited through time and space several decades ago. It’s an old Welsh farm table, about 350 years old.

The table has its own story….its own history which it shares with us. It is part of our family, a possession of value, practical, sentimental and material. To be sure, it’s got its share of damage. Ancient initials were once carved into it. A heavy tankard must have dropped on it, and it is pitted in places where ancient knives were conveniently held firm by the tip buried in its surface. All these disfigurements have added to its value as the years passed as they are as antique as the table itself. Two household cats from our era have added their modern scratch marks. I can imagine the scene at the Antique Road Show appraisal. “It’a a lovely historic piece, with some of its original hardware and wooden pegs and would have appreciated far beyond its original value. But it is clear that your cat has enjoyed a lifetime of use by using its soft pine legs as a scratching post which has dropped its value to a mere fraction of what it might have been worth.

But no matter its material worth, the table remains a valuable part of our family life and my three children have assured that I need not worry about who among them will inherit it when I die. They will simply saw it in three pieces and each will receive a part of it.

That’s a joke, of course…a long standing joke in our family. But regardless of its destination, the table is desired not for its material value, high or low, but for the love that it conveys….an unchanging and enduring holding of the Sprit that is meaningful in our lives. You can probably think of these kinds of items in your home…..an old dish or ornament that has been lovingly glued together after breaking, an old chair that rocked several babies to sleep or a picture of the place you were born. Or even something very new, but eternally precious to you and to all who know and love you. All these and more have value in our lives….they are part of an inheritance of love…. born of memory and story….and they are possessions.

Will we have to give them up to follow Jesus?

And what about all those other possessions we own…the house, the car, or the money we feel compelled to accumulate…….do we have to give these up too?

In Mark’s Gospel reading today, we are told the story of a man who has obviously heard of Jesus and his message of the Kingdom of God. The story begins on a high note….in a way as an affirmation Jesus’ message to the crowds who came to hear him wherever he goes. Hearing talk about the coming reign of God’s Kingdom, and moved by what he has heard about Jesus and his message of deliverance, he runs up to Jesus, kneels down and says, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus must have been pleased to meet someone who had obviously been thinking about his message. His disciples haven’t been asking this kind of question……..they’ve been too busy trying to figure out who is next in line….jockeying for first position and all the while showing signs of being dismally unsure of their own faithful reasons for following Jesus. This man was seeking answers to questions he must have been thinking about. He is asking Jesus what he has to do, what it must take to inherit eternal life. He wants Jesus to know he has kept all God’s commandments faithfully, and he probably expected Jesus to say….you are really on the right track with that. Keep it up and you will be assured of inheriting eternal life. But for Jesus, these are merely preparatory questions to the real deal. There is more…. far more for this man to do. At first Jesus was a little annoyed by the way the man addresses him as “Good,” and he quickly corrects him, not wanting the man to elevate him to status that he does not seek, citing only God a the one who deserves to be called good.

The man was probably a fellow Jew who clearly was doing pretty good business with the Romans. During this time, most of the Jews in Judea and Galilee were poor and oppressed by a heavy Roman hand which occupied the territory. The only Jews who did not pay a social, political, economic or religious price under this occupation were the ones who collaborated in business or in other similar ways.

The message from Jesus to these wealthy Jews was that, at the very least, they should share some of their wealth which they had acquired by working for the Romans with the destitute Jewish people all around them who were oppressed by the same regime.

The Gospel reveals t deep compassion Jesus has for this man….this seeker…. whom he knows is rich and who is about to be very, very grieved at the answer Jesus is about to give him.

Nowhere else in his Gospel are we told that Jesus said he loved someone. He is loving, healing, preaching, walking, going from here to there, calming storms and raging waves, with very little time for rest, and very little time to speak of loving anyone, even his disciples who were probably too frustrating for him to express these kinds of feelings. But he loved this man. He tells the man that he’s doing some good things by following the commandments, but that he is lacking in the one thing that will allow him to inherit the Kingdom.

He must look at his wealth and begin to think about how best to use it for the benefit of those who were in great need. And then, and only then, could he begin to follow Jesus and the treasure he would inherit from heaven.

The story is ironic. This is the only moment in Mark’s Gospel when Jesus lovingly invites someone to follow him but the person cannot do it. What Jesus is asking him to do seems to be far more extreme for the man than obeying the commandments.

The man heard Jesus give him a task to do which seemed impossible for him to take on. It’s too much for the man and he leaves, dejected, grieving, confused and unable to understand this last vital commandment to let go of his possessions in order to receive the greater one which would be freely given.

The tragic truth is that actually the man didn’t need to “do” anything other than simply love back in response to the love he received from Jesus, from God. By loving back, he would be moved to join his voice to Jesus’s call for radical change in a system that lined his pockets but left so many others in despair.

One rarely needs to “do” particular things in order to inherit anything. To “inherit” something means that it is freely given to us, usually with love and a desire for our benefit. To inherit the Kingdom of God is to look about you to see all the treasure that is freely given to you in love. Indeed, there is very little we can do to stop this inheritance once we realize that it is ours to receive and when we are moved to receive it and then to share it.

The dilemma of the rich man is also our dilemma. We cannot really follow Jesus until we take a good hard look at how we use our money and possessions. Are they the organizing center of our lives? Do they possess us as much as we possess them?

There are times for all of us, when our money and possessions of value, whether finding them, having them, holding on to them, become the most important and central focus of our lives.

Just as he did to the man in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus hits us with similar extremes almost beyond our comprehension.

An extreme demand:

* Give away your possessions to the poor and follow me

…An extreme judgment:

* It is impossible to enter the Kingdom of God until you do

And….an extreme promise:

* With God all things are possible. Leave everything behind…..drop your metaphorical nets and follow me….make me your priority above all your possessions, the people in your life, everything and you will be rewarded a hundredfold.

Hearing this, the disciples are confused. Did they not do just that? But they are reminded of their continuing selfish desire to take care of themselves first, or sending children away from the food. Their actions were like putting roadblocks in the way of their own courage to simply follow Jesus, regardless of where it might lead or the challenges it might produce.

In D.H. Lawrence’1926 short story, *Rocking Horse Winner,* a young, middle-class commercial artist is outwardly successful but is haunted by a sense of failure…of not making enough money. The family lifestyle drains her sole income and there is an unspoken anxiety about money in the house. Her children sense this and her son thinks he can hear the house “whispering”…..”*There must be more money*. *There must be more money.* He thinks that riding his rocking horse faster and faster will bring him money. He begins betting on real horse races, picking his horses when rocking on his rocking horse, and thus making more and more money. Eventually, well….read the story and you’ll learn the ending.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

It is the whisper most of us have heard in our own hearts. Either we have it or we don’t, but either way, grip of power which we allow our money and our possessions to impose upon *us*, becomes the priority that the Gospel is calling into question today.

What the rich man lacked as he walked away from Jesus grieving ….was freedom. By inviting him to follow, Jesus was giving the man a choice for freedom rather than enslavement by his possessions.

Like the man, Jesus is loving us for all that we do that is good in the world and for our faithfulness and for keeping the commandments and our intentions for good. And, like a good teacher, he is pointing out our lack of understanding and our misunderstanding of the choices he is giving us:

 To need to possess things……… or to be free of having to possess things.

To determine our importance by the material value of our possessions……….. or to keep things that hold value in our hearts.

To entangle ourselves in selfish attachments and limitations………. or to free ourselves from the urge to accumulate more than we need.

To allow ourselves to buy into the modern day material system………… or to find a way to live with a kind of counter-cultural boldness by saying, I have all that I need to live.

Are we able to do it? What is it that you are hanging on to, clinging to, even though you don’t need it? What accumulation of possessions is filling your garage or spare bedroom that could be being used by someone who has nothing? How can any of us follow in the footsteps of Christ if we don’t address our need to idolize something else?

Our personal circumstances may be far different than those of Jesus’ day, and our modern Western culture is different than life under the Romans. Nevertheless, just like the rich man of this Gospel story, we are called to examine them. The message hasn’t changed, and we, too, are called, each one of us, and as a church community and as a nation, to choose to replace conflict with compassion, to replace accumulation for self with service for others.

There is a tension in the choice. If we cling to our riches, Jesus says it will be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for us to enter the Kingdom of God. Yet he leaves the door open to the narrow gate open: “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God, for God all things are possible.”

This is good news indeed , even with the warning it contains in its promise. When we make the choice to follow Jesus, we discover a God who loves us enough to create hard choices for us, making us uncomfortable and creating disruptions and upheavals until one day, we will discover the treasure that is waiting for us to inherit, treasure that will rain upon us and smell as sweet and life giving as the rain that began falling on the burned earth after this year’s long hot summer. Treasure that is as freely given, as is any inheritance.

Treasure that requires nothing of us other than to simply love God and God’s people and to our possessions of the heart as an inheritance for the world. What is important to our heart, we keep for posterity, the rest we can simply give away.

Yes,,,,,we have a choice.

The questions Jesus raises remains: Which is our greater love…….possessions or Jesus. If the question were put to each of us today? Do you keep all the things you love, like my old table, your favorite books, the piece of driftwood that called to you when you walked on a long-ago beach? Are are you unable to leave the place you love or, for the love of God, could you leave them behind?

To become true disciples, we realize the task we are called to take up. To think beyond our dedication to being simply good. Jesus leaves us with really no choice, and we begin to let things go, downsizing our pride, ego, self-service and possessions, taking with us only what we need in order to follow Jesus, giving up our selves for the benefit of others.

Choosing to sacrifice self, for the benefit of others, is not easy. I’m reminded of William Styron’s excruciating story, *Sophie’s Choice,* in which a mother, arriving at Auschwitz, was forced to choose which one of her two children would be gassed and which would proceed to the labor camp. To avoid having both children killed, she chose her son to be sent to the children’s camp and her daughter to be sent to her death in Crematorium Two.[[2]](#footnote-2)

She is tormented by this choice for the rest of her life, eventually committing suicide herself. It is an extreme and horrifying example of not offering herself as a sacrifice to save her children, but rather surviving as a result of theirs.

Before we rush to judgment, we might consider choices we make in our own lives…less life and death perhaps, yet nevertheless, choices which kill the spirit, tear families apart and leave us tormented by the results of our actions. Too often we hear of families fighting over inheritance, money, possessions, what they think they are entitled to, instead of simply translating the inheritance into a benefit that may be received with gratitude and love.

Yes….we have choices ……and Jesus wants us to choose to enter His transformation story. A story about life in the Kingdom of God….a time and place where our very character is invited to undergo change….our outlook, our lifestyle and our expectations and responses to the world in which we are a part.

And it is a story of commitment. To identify ourselves fully and completely as Christians, walking in The Way of Christ, disciples of Jesus, willing to capitulate completely into the lifestyle he is calling us to will lead us …like little children taking their first steps…toward a new way of living our lives on earth.

And all that is required of us is to love….and to summon bold courage to approach God’s throne of Grace, “we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

That mercy and grace is our inheritance from God. Just like all the other beloved places and things that we have inherited that have value only in our hearts.

 It is our Divine Inheritance………costing us nothing and giving us all we will ever need to inherit eternal life.

Amen

Written to the Glory of God

E. J. R. Culver+

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1. "The Rocking-horse Winner." Magill Book Reviews (1990): Academic Search Premier. EBSCO. Web. 24 Oct. 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. William Styron, *Sophie’s Choice,* 1979. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Hebrews 4:16 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)