

A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector,
 St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina,
 on 15 October 2006 (Proper 23):
 Amos 5:6-7, 10-15; Hebrews 3:1-6; Mark 10:17-31

Investing in Thanksgiving

On the road again, Jesus continued his journey toward Jerusalem. He had just slid his pack over his left shoulder and taken the first step on the day's trek, when a man ran up to him. Sliding to a halt on his knees before Jesus, a well-dressed, young man blurted out a question. "Good Rabbi, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Instantly, Jesus sized the supplicant up and wondered about the reason for this unexpected encounter. Why such a large question, offered first thing in the morning, just as Jesus was leaving town? Was this intentional on the young man's part? Was it so that only a quick answer would be possible with no chance for a revealing conversation? Why would such a young man, dressed in such good clothes, race up to him in the last moment and ask such a profound question? What did he really want to know?

All this flashed timelessly through Jesus' mind. Yet, his outward response did not miss a beat and took the form of his usual custom in such situations. He responded to a question with a question. "Why do you call me good? Only God is good."

Jesus paused for a moment, as if he were offering the young man the chance to speak about what was really on his mind. For his part, Jesus would have loved to ask the young man: "Is this a God-question you are asking me; or are you simply looking for an autograph and a tee shirt?" Yet, when the opportunity for dialogue slid by unrecognized, Jesus gave the young man his answer. "You know the commandments about honoring our relationship with God and with those we meet. Do them."

Hearing this, the young man replied, lowering voice, and replied: "Teacher, I have kept the commandments -- all of them -- from my youth." At these words, Jesus looked him squarely in the eye -- and loved him. Not many people, and certainly not many young folks, work so hard to do the right thing and begin to succeed at living what they say matters. This one...this one did, and Jesus loved him for it.

At that, the intensity on Jesus' face softened, and with a gentle smile, he gave the young man a second opening to move into his initial question about eternal life. "Well then," the Lord said, "there is only one thing left for you to do. If you are to inherit eternal life, sell

what you have; give it to the poor, and come follow me.”

As if the sun had passed behind a cloud, the young man’s face darkened. This was the last thing he expected to hear. Slowly, he rose to his feet without daring to return Jesus’ gaze; and with a palpable heaviness in his body, he walked away. For he was holding very tightly to many things and was not about to let them go.

Jesus’ eyes followed him for a distance as he walked away. Then glancing at his disciples, Jesus noticed their stunned looks and put summarizing words to the scene. “Do you have any idea how difficult it is for people who ‘have it all’ to enter God’s kingdom? You can’t imagine how hard it is.”

That set the Twelve back on their heels, and they exclaimed: “Then who has any chance at all?” Jesus was blunt: “No chance at all, if you think you can pull it off on your own. But there’s every chance in the world if you let God do it.” With this, Jesus made his way toward the road and continued his walk toward Jerusalem.

Why do you think the young man came up to Jesus in the first place? And why his question about eternal life? What do you think was going on there? What was eating at him? Why the clumsiness in his approach? Why couldn’t he get to the point? What did he want from Jesus?

Of course, there is no way any of us can answer these questions

with precision. Yet, I believe that it is important for each of us to consider these questions seriously because the fact is we know this young man quite well. He is us, and we are him.

It is no accident that St. Mark provides us with two clear pieces of information about this character who runs up to Jesus. He is young, and he is rich; and I would suggest that the reason this fellow risks tearing the knees out of his Brooks Brothers suit and scuffing his Gucci loafers is that he is haunted and needs to know something important in the clearest of terms. The problem is that he can’t seem to find the right words; or maybe he is afraid to say them. I think I know them. I think he wants very much to know: “Is that all there is?”

It has been suggested that life would be infinitely easier to live, if our lives were cast in terms of a movie. All we would need to do, then, is to pay attention to the sound track. This would allow us to stay one step ahead of the proverbial curve in terms of knowing the meaning of our lives. For instance, if in meeting someone we suddenly heard soft strains of violins in the background, we might want either to “pop the question” immediately or sign on the dotted line. Conversely, if that meeting produced ominous sounds of brass, thundering away, we would most likely be wise to turn and run away as fast as possible. In each case, the sound track to our life would be a very helpful warning of what was in store, of what was really going on.

Taking this sound track idea and applying it to our biblical “young man, I think the music he is hearing – the tune he recognizes sounds a great deal like Peggy Lee’s old torch song, the refrain of which poses that haunting question: “Is that all there is?” On his knees before Jesus, silk regimental tie askew under the collar of his silk shirt, arms extended upward to reveal his Rolex watch, his manicured and buffed fingernails plead for an answer. With words that he cannot quite find, our “young man” wants to know: “Is that all there is?” “I have kept God’s law. I have become a success before my time. I have it all. But it’s not enough; is it?”

“Is that all there is, Good Teacher?”
“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Maybe the reason Jesus looked intently at him and loved him with a deep compassion has to do with the fact that such honest insight is usually reserved for one with much more experience. For a young man to sense that “having it all” is not all it’s cracked up to be speaks of an emotional maturity of the rarest kind.

Perhaps at middle age one might expect to hear this question asked, usually accompanied by a deep and resigned sigh. Yes, after the luster of the life we have managed to make for ourselves unavoidably tarnishes, it is not that unusual to hear middle-aged men and women wondering in this way. Surely, this is said in old age, when the body betrays one’s dreams, and the fantasy of being in control

plummets in direct proportion to the rising number of prescribed medications one must take just to get through the day. But how is it that one so young willingly entertains such a question? He must have been a remarkable person, and Jesus loved him for it.

I also believe that this is the reason that Jesus made such a stunningly spectacular demand on the young man. Implicitly, when Jesus invited him to let go of what he had, give it away, and come follow him, he was actually saying something along these lines. “I love you enough to tell you the unwanted truth. This is not all there is, and what you long for cannot ever be earned. What you long for is Communion, and that is a gift from God. You must learn to receive this gift by making room for it in your life; and you must learn to trust this gift by learning how to say and live “thank you.”

I believe that the power of this gospel story stems from the most fundamental issue in human life. “Will I be ok?” “What do I need to do to be secure, safe?”

“Eternal life” is what the story calls it. Eternal life is what Communion is about: that is, living in the realm of what life with God is like. And let me hasten to add that it is very sad to interpret this life in terms of waiting until we die in order to go to heaven. What Jesus offers to the young man – and to us – does not require him or us to wait until we die to have what we need and cannot give to ourselves. Granted, eternal life, Communion, is not fully within

our grasp right now. As the poet rightly says: “We have miles and miles to go before we sleep.”

Yet, the offer is made now in and through Jesus. The problem is that so many of us find it hard to receive the gift because our hands are wrapped so tightly around the life we have forged for ourselves that it makes it hard to open them up to receive.

It is so easy to say “let go and let God,” especially if we have a lot of stuff – or even if we think having a lot of stuff will save us from the emptiness and fear. Yet, as with the rich young man, Jesus asks us to loosen the white-knuckled grip we usually have on our lives and begin to open our hands to receive lasting life.

This is not to say that we can turn our backs on being responsible people who need to put food on the table and keep the wolf from our door and care for our neighbor. Jesus is not saying this either to the young man or to us. What Jesus is saying is “first things first” – that life is more than our stuff. Life is about being partners with God. (Partners invest; Customers look for a good deal.) And as such we share that divine partnership with one another. Life is about Communion.

This is the time of the year, when I must speak to you about making a financial pledge to St. Martin’s. My request is that every member of this parish church community make a financial pledge today and that you honor that promise fully. In the context of what I have said about the rich young man

and his question to Jesus, this request can be summed up in two brief, concluding thoughts.

One thought has to do with making sure that this place continues to be in a position to ask the haunting question about eternal life. My request has to do with assuring that St. Martin’s will always be here to act like Noah’s ark. I say this because, my friends, the rains are coming, and with them the flood. You and I are responsible for seeing to it that this spiritual and sacramental ship is prepared to weather the coming storms, and those storms are coming. They are storms rooted in demographics that challenge us to share our faith at least as much as we desire to receive the benefits of our faith. They are storms rooted in a society that increasingly defines itself in the secular terms of “me first.” They are storms of fear that require the antidote of maturity and community, if we are not to lose our vision, our hope.

Your pledge, your commitment of money to St. Martin’s is about this type of investment; but the other aspect of your financial pledge to the life and ministry of this place is actually more important and is the one I am most interested in. Your pledge of money to this place and its mission is an investment in gratitude and, thereby, it is an investment in your willingness and your ability to open your hands in trust to God and to say “thank you.” It is in terms of this morning’s gospel an investment in your eternal life.

What I am saying to you is that your financial pledge is an investment in one powerful discipline that will loosen the death-grip so many of us have on our lives. And instead of grabbing for life and never getting what we need, this spiritual discipline, this investment teaches us to receive with gratitude and to live in thanksgiving.

Giving of this sort most likely starts from a sense of duty. It may even start with thinking that you are paying dues. But with prayerful diligence dues-paying and duty-giving lead to gratefulness because Communion is what we truly need and Communion comes from God in abundance. Your financial pledge to this church is meant to be a way you say “thank you” to God.

Some of us are already there, and you can see it in their faces and in their lives. They are abundantly grateful people, no matter what. Others of us are on our way. I am asking you to give so that you will honor your commitment to practicing thanksgiving. As you do, God will loosen your grip and we will find our hands open to receive the life Christ has given us. And those hands will be full.

I will close with this statement from a thankful and free person. He says: “For happiness is not what makes us grateful. It is gratefulness that makes us happy.” It is, in its own way, what Jesus has said to the young man. Do not walk away from the gift. Amen.