

**What God Asks of the Rich:
Social Location and Care for Immigrants and other Marginalized People**

**Sermon Notes for the Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Columbus Day Weekend, October 11, 2015**

The lectionary lessons that are held in common for this Sunday are the Epistle (Hebrews 4: 12-16) and the Gospel (Mark 10: 17-31). For our congregations they offer powerful words about one's social location and how one's location relates to the kingdom of God. On this Columbus Day weekend we are reminded that more and more cities are celebrating the holiday as Indigenous Peoples' Day with the poignant reminder that the overwhelming majority of Americans are immigrants and that the undocumented immigrants often suffer the same fate as Native Americans -extreme poverty, oppressive and sporadic work environments, and the stigma of being what Jesus lovingly termed 'the least of these' who too often denigrated in our culture that celebrates affluence.

Hebrews 4: 12-16

In this epistle, Jesus is identified not only as the Son of God but as 'a great high priest.' But this is no high priest removed from the sufferings of the people, this is a high priest "who in every respect has been tested as we are" (4:15). This should not only speak to those who suffer or have failings or weaknesses within our congregation, but should make us aware of those who are crucified in our culture. Jesus not only 'shared our common lot' but because of his sinless nature was faithful even unto death.

It leads to the question, who is crucified in our culture? Over the summer, hostile language toward the undocumented immigrants has increased as the next presidential election approaches. Undocumented immigrants have become the scapegoats for many of society's problems.

Those being crucified today become Jesus Christ in the here and now. Miguel A. De La Torre writes, "Their [read: undocumented immigrants] suffering has the potential of redeeming the powerful and privileged by providing them with an opportunity to interact with Christ manifested in the lives and struggles of those living on the margins of society. As those with power die to their privilege and seek solidarity with those who suffer under oppressive structures, they discover an opportunity to meet and know Christ."

This letter speaks to our social location. It makes us aware of those who are often persecuted or marginalized simply because of the place they were born, the jobs that they hold, or how they entered our country. The thoughtful preacher will be aware not only of the social location of his/her congregation but will be aware of the insecurity that often leads even those who faithfully attend church to separate themselves from those on the margins. Often, the response of our churches is to offer charity without addressing the injustice that makes charity necessary.

But there is good news in this letter. "Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need"(4:16). This verse can be read in two ways. It can be that mercy and grace helps **us** in time of need, or; it can mean that because of the mercy that we receive from God

we can help **others** in **their** time of need. I would suggest it should be read in both ways. Each of us have what the writer calls 'weaknesses' but each of us have the capability of reaching out and being in solidarity with those who are the most vulnerable and needy in our society. This is a bold proclamation!

Mark 10:17-31

Social location is again prevalent in this Sunday's gospel reading. Although the 'man' who kneels before Jesus in Mark's writing is not defined as rich or young as in the other synoptic gospels, he is identified as having many possessions. (10:22) Perhaps this is a good starting point for reflection on this lesson. Because most of the people in our pews, even if they have substantial debts (i.e. a mortgage, credit cards) also have many possessions (i.e. a flat screen television, two cars). But even with these possessions we find ourselves spiritually and emotionally restless. Was that restlessness what caused the man to ask Jesus, ". . . what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Have we gotten to a point where we understand that our possessions do not satisfy so we long for 'treasure in heaven.'

Jesus was "setting out on a journey" (10:17) when he is confronted by the man with many possessions. In other words, Jesus, who in Mark's gospel was always on the move, meets the man in the midst of life. Although the man seemingly asks an ethereal question about eternal life, Jesus responds with words that bring him back to earth and words that would have been well understood by any righteous Jew. Jesus first reminds this man that God alone is good. Some may be troubled that Jesus even states that **he** should not be called good. Then Jesus cites the six 'ethical' commandments, "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother." (10:19)

"A closer reading, however, reveals that the last commandment - "Do not covet what belongs to your neighbor" (Exodus 20:17) - has been replaced by "Do not defraud." This Levitical censure appears in a section of Torah that concerns socioeconomic conduct in the Sabbath community: "You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer." (Leviticus 19:13) With this deft bit of editing, Jesus reveals that he is more interested in how this man became so affluent than in his pious claims." [Ched Myers et. al]

This raises the social location question to the fore. In our market, commodity driven economy who pays the price for the affluence of the many? Does our relatively inexpensive food come to us from the labors of underpaid and exploited farm workers, is our clothing the result of sweatshop laborers, and are our hotel rooms made ready by the poorest of our society? And how does the seeming disappearance of the middle class, with all of its anxieties, affect the lives of those on the margins, especially undocumented immigrants?

It is difficult to overestimate the radical proposal in Jesus's response to the kneeling man. "sell what you own, and give the money to the poor" (10: 21). This is a radical call to discipleship and Jesus turns the desire for eternal life (heavenly reward) on its head by telling his disciples as the man walks away, presumably to cling to his possessions, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" (10:23)

The preacher has much to work with in this lesson. Who are the rich? Who are the poor? What is our (members of the worshipping congregation) social location?

But Jesus loves this man and wants him to face the reality of his life. Jesus isn't just calling this man to be charitable by giving his wealth to the poor, he is indicating that to be part of the kingdom of God movement requires economic restitution. In our society with its profound economic inequality we are called to understand God's 'preferential option for the poor.' As people who claim to be part of the kingdom of God movement we are called stand in solidarity with those on the margins of our society - who often are exploited in a shadow economy where low wages and wage theft are prevalent.

This call to radical discipleship is difficult to attain individually. It is why people of faith gather in community. We wrestle with our social location, we reflect on what it means to be 'possessed by possessions' and we ask how we are complicit in our society's economic inequality. Communities of faith are the places that these realities can be explored. The preacher, like Jesus, must love the congregation in these explorations. But, the radical nature of the call must not be watered down or addressed superficially.

Jacques Ellul notes that the only way to live free from money is to give it away: "How overcome the spiritual 'power' of money? Not by accumulating more money, not by using money for good purposes, not by being just and fair in our dealings. The **law of money** is the law of accumulation, of buying and selling. That is why the only way to overcome the spiritual 'power' of money is to give our money away, thus desacralizing it and freeing ourselves from its control. . . To give away money is to win a victory over the spiritual power that oppresses us."

Wealth and poverty are not only personal realities. We live in a world in which the vast majority of people barely survive and that many in our society, the richest in the world struggle, as well.

"Mark's story about the rich young man must also be interpreted in our own times as an invitation to transform the systems and structures that create wealth and poverty, that maintain privilege within our own society." [Ched Myers et. al.]

It is interesting that Jesus invites this man to "come, follow me." (10:21) Jesus is on 'the way'. It is a way of life which can only be taken one step at a time. Perhaps the radical call of Jesus can only be approached, in our culture, by a systematic, step by step approach. We, as followers of Jesus, are invited to be followers. To leave those things behind which possess us, and be possessed instead by the spirit of Jesus. We are guided by Jesus' profound, oft repeated statement, ". . . many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." (10:31)

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