



“Loosen Your Grip”
Scripture – Mark 10:17-25
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, September 24, 2017

There is a story about the Gauls that some say is legend and others say is historical fact. Either way it is instructive. In ancient times, the Gauls were Celtic tribes who inhabited what is now Western Europe. By the time of the Christian era, the Romans had conquered the Gauls, but many of them continued to resist. There would be occasional uprisings and battles would ensue.

Christian missionaries journeyed into the territory and, over time, many of the Gauls converted to Christianity. However, when they were baptized and immersed under water, they would hold up one arm to keep it from getting wet. That way, the next time there was a battle, the Gaul could proclaim, “This arm is not baptized.” He would grab his sword with that arm and march off to fight his enemy.¹

Whether or not it’s true, it is a powerful graphic. “We can picture in our minds a warrior at his baptism, head and body under water, except for his arm thrust high in the air, attempting to keep that part of his body, that aspect of his identity, free from the influence of Christ. It is a compelling image, because for each of us it begs the question: What do *we* attempt to keep dry? What do we try to keep from being under Christ’s claim?”² Our wallets?

More than 700 million people on our planet live on less than two dollars a day. The recent natural disasters have brought home scenes of many who have been left with nothing. So, if you have a roof over your head, food on the table, a car, a phone and a closet of clothes, by world standards you are wealthy. When Jesus said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God,” he was not simply talking about the top 1 percent; he was talking to pretty much everyone in this sanctuary.

Mark Twain once said. “It ain’t the parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me; it is the parts that I do understand.” Today’s passage is one that make most Presbyterians squirm.

One of the struggles most of us face is the place of wealth in our lives. How much time and how much energy do we devote to pursuing it? For what purposes will we use it? How do we prevent it from skewing our vision of what is truly important in life?

According to this morning’s text, a man ran up to Jesus and said: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” In response Jesus named several of the 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.’”

If this man already felt that he had kept the commandments, why did he ask Jesus “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” In our day, “eternal life” has been narrowed to mean life after death. But in the first century, it meant not only a future life, but a rich, abundant life now. So, the man was asking, “What must I do to find a fulfilling existence today and forever?”

One possibility is that he thought he had already gained it and he just wanted to make himself look good in front of others. But I think a more likely possibility is that he had lived according to the mantra of the world: wealth will make you happy – and he found that something was still missing. Like the person who believes all his dreams have come true when he hits the lottery, this man had his riches, but he still felt empty inside. That is why Jesus said, “You lack one thing.”

Jesus was able to perceive that while this man lived a righteous life and fulfilled many core commandments, all was not right with his soul. And the reply of Jesus haunts any of us who take our faith seriously. “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

Our text says, “The man went away grieving, for he had many possessions.” Or, as *The Message* version of the Bible translates it: “The man’s face clouded over. This was the last thing he expected to hear, and he walked off with a heavy heart. He was holding on tight to a lot of things, and not about to let go.” Having lived according to the commandments, this man believed he had the right stuff. But it turns out that he just had too much stuff.

Jesus says, “Sell what you own and give the money to the poor.” Jesus exaggerates in order to jar us. He understands the seductive power of money. He knows that if we do not loosen the grip that wealth has on our lives, it will gradually and subtly lure us away from God.

I suspect that if the man in our passage held his riches loosely – if he used some of his wealth to help the poor in his village – Jesus would not have demanded that he dispose of everything. But this man’s wealth had become his identity; it had replaced his soul. He was blind to the way his riches guided his view of life and his decision-making. Jesus knew that the only way to cure this man’s dis-ease, was to dispose of what was distorting his vision and making him ill.

While I seriously doubt that Steve Jobs was a great supporter of religious institutions, he posed a rhetorical question that sounded like Jesus wisdom and what the rich man needed to hear. Jobs said: “What’s the point of being the richest guy in the graveyard?”

There was a time when most people who faithfully attended church were present for two reasons: to be reassured that their sins were forgiven and to gain the inside track on heaven. In our day that has changed. Most do not feel a heavy burden of guilt from which they need to be freed, and most do not attend for the sake of the life to come. Most attend because of the impact faith has on their lives today. People yearn for a meaningful life, for a supportive community, and for a more joyful existence. Giving away a portion of your wealth helps to pave the path to these true riches. Two sociologists from Notre Dame have written a book entitled *The Paradox of Generosity*. The paradox they pursue – with a mountain of statistics behind them – is this: You would think that if you give away your time, energy and money, you would have less of it, which would diminish your happiness. However, their research, which included surveys and long interviews, found that the opposite is true. Thus, the book’s subtitle, which is: *Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose*.

Here are a few of their findings: Generosity often fosters and reinforces positive emotions and reduces negative emotions...Generosity often triggers chemical reactions in the brain and body that increase pleasure...Generosity reduces self-absorption which reduces anxiety...Generosity increases your confidence in your ability to succeed which enhances both your happiness and your health.

To sum it up, their research revealed that those who give generously of their time, their gifts, and their money, are the ones who most often flourish.³ *Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose*.

Unfortunately, most people never reach this personal discovery because our culture constantly blares the opposite. Advertisers seize on what most people mistakenly believe, which is the more you have the happier you will be. You see it in ad after ad. Whether it is a new car or phone or jewelry or clothes or technological gadget, true happiness is just an Amazon click away.

The secular world constantly proclaims the message that buying something new will give us a thrill. The idea seeps into our unconsciousness and gradually burrows its way into our assumptions if we are not vigilant in countering it. Jesus teaches the opposite. He says, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.” Like a shot of caffeine and sugar, material treasures can give us a short-term thrill, but only spiritual treasures can satisfy our deepest yearnings.

Hear me correctly. I am not saying that having money will lead to your downfall. We all know that money can enhance our lives – it can help us purchase a home in a safe neighborhood and a good school district. Money can allow us to travel and see God’s creation. Money can advance our education and allow us to eat in nice restaurants. The problem comes when we believe the myth that stuff will give us lasting happiness and make life fulfilling and hopeful. The problem comes when we do not experience the joy of giving away a portion of our money to change people’s lives and to support institutions that enhance health, wholeness, and well being.

In our recent capital campaign, many people were extremely generous because they know that Westminster brings people closer to God, supports people both within and outside of our congregation when life is cruel, makes a positive impact on our community, trumpets values our world is lacking, and so much more.

I would never reveal names and the amounts people gave, but I can tell you this. There were large gifts that took my breath away and there were very modest gifts that required such an extraordinary sacrifice it made tears well in my eyes.

The success of our capital campaign means that once we have all paid our pledges, we will insure that our facilities will be kept in excellent condition for decades to come. The strain comes in the intervening five years while our pledges are being paid. Which means our annual budget will be a struggle.

Soon, you will be receiving the annual stewardship letter. Please do not groan! When it arrives, do not set it aside as if it is simply another piece of mail. It is not just another piece of mail. It is an opportunity for you to express a generous spirit. Our gifts to Westminster make a difference in our lives and make a difference in the lives of many others.

Please read the letter carefully, thoughtfully, and prayerfully. And as you fill out the pledge card, remember the rich man in this story and affirm what *we* know, and what he simply could not comprehend: *Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose*.

NOTES

1. Mark Allan Powell, *Giving to God*, pp. xi–xii.
2. Shannon J. Kershner, “Give. Grow. Become! *Why We Give an Offering*,” Sunday, October 4, 2015.
3. Michael Lindvall, “Grasping Hurts,” November 20, 2016.