



“Holding On Tightly”

Sermon preached by Anne R. Ledbetter

Sunday, October 11, 2009

Scripture – Mark 10:17-22

Several years ago on a women’s retreat we reflected on the theme of wisdom – noting at least three different types:

there is *conventional* wisdom which warns “haste makes waste,” and “charity begins at home;” there is *cultural* wisdom which teaches “money will make you happy,” and preaches “buy now and pay later;”

then there is *divine* wisdom which tells us “you must lose your life in order to find it,” and “where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

In Corinthians the apostle Paul writes that God’s wisdom seems foolishness to the world. And don’t we know it?!

Our story this morning spotlights this tension between human and divine wisdom and tends to make us uncomfortable, as well it should. Cultural wisdom would have us believe that “wealth brings happiness,” but Jesus seems to be preaching “giving away your wealth will lead to an abundant life.”

In the scripture reading Mark tells us that a young man ran to Jesus. Note he ran, not walked – evidently our guy was in a hurry, eager, earnest. He then asked Jesus a simple, but weighty question: “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” We get the impression that this young man had it all: a great job, good friends, nice family, and attractive personality. He was going places in life, with a fat stock portfolio to boot. But in spite of his wealth and success, the man feels dissatisfied, and is searching for fulfillment. There’s something missing in his life – and who doesn’t know what that feels like?

In response, Jesus, points to Torah, the commandments given to Moses: “You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, and so on.” Nodding, the man responds, “Oh yes, teacher, I have followed the commandments since learning them in Sabbath School.” Jesus then peers deeply into the man’s soul, perceiving his aching need for something more, his hunger for a meaningful life. Mark says that looking at the man, Jesus loved him. The young man had attempted to follow all the rules of faith, but he knew in his heart that there was more. And so he asks this new and amazing teacher a big question, and receives in return a

whopping answer: “go, sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, and follow me.”

Perhaps we have heard this story so many times that we risk not really absorbing its truth for our lives. This snippet of Godly wisdom sounds so ridiculous that we tend to blow it off without further thought. Therefore, I ask you to listen again, as I read the last two verses from the contemporary version, *The Message*, by Eugene Peterson:

²¹Jesus looked (the young man) hard in the eye—and loved him! (Then Jesus) said, "There's one thing left: Go sell whatever you own and give it to the poor. All your wealth will then be heavenly wealth. And come follow me."

²²The 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**.”¹

Essentially Jesus invites the man to become a disciple, to live a distinctively different life, to let go of conventional wealth and thereby receive divine treasure, to shed himself of cultural trappings and travel life’s path lightly. What about us? To what do we cling tightly? Our money? Our loved ones? Our status? Our possessions?

What is behind our tightfistedness? Why do we hold on so firmly to our possessions, our wealth, our stuff? Some say that seniors are often fiscally frugal due to living through the Great Depression – no, not last year, but the early 1930’s! They remember the masses without jobs, their parents scrimping to put food on the table, the relentless anxiety that haunted many and nurtured a fear in not having enough. That’s old fear, dating back 70 years, but it was planted in many of today’s seniors when they were children or youth, so it runs very deep.

A few years ago I led a workshop on “Supporting One’s Aging Parents” at a local church, and people repeatedly asked: “How can I encourage my parents to downsize and get rid of some of their stuff?” We went on to discuss together how one’s life story, and memories are often tied to one’s possessions – grandmother’s dining room table, Dad’s stamp collection, our children’s toys, Aunt Carol’s wedding dress, granddad’s golf clubs, brother’s bunk beds, great-grandmother’s silver tea service, and so on. What memory-soaked stuff are we clinging to - in our homes, in our basements and attics? What do we own that is collecting dust, or tucked away forgotten in those self-storage units that we rent? Even conventional wisdom reminds us that “you can’t take it with you!” but we strive to cling to it as long as we can!

Consider us baby boomers. Why do we hold on so tightly to our stuff? Sadly, most of us have been easy targets for Madison Avenue – we bought into the media message that more would make us happy – more money, more food, more house, more furniture, faster cars and computers, sleeker phones and sleeker bodies. Regrettably, our appetite for more, often led to longer work hours, less time with family, higher mortgages, greater demands. With more stuff, we may also have reaped more stress and more health problems.

With our own dismal track record, we boomers find it hard not to be concerned about the rising generations. Some studies suggest that twice as many college students believe it is essential to become financially well off, as those who think it is essential to develop a philosophy

of life. Did you know that the number of shopping malls in the U.S. surpassed the number of high schools...OVER 20 YEARS AGO?! Until recently sociologists reported that the average American would spend one entire year of life watching TV commercials – which of course, will send them to those shopping malls, or perhaps eBay.ⁱⁱ TIVO and hulu(.com) may be cutting down the amount of time we spend watching commercials, but our wired and wireless world brings shopping malls to our finger tips.

Culture proclaims: consume the good life! Get more, take more, buy more, stock up! But Jesus prescribes: Let it all go. Sell your stuff and give the money to the poor. And we, just like the young man, shake our heads sadly, unable to fathom Jesus' prescription for eternal life. Instead we prefer conventional wisdom which cautions: hold on tightly.

This week as I studied online statistics regarding our consumerist society, I found a website called ecofuture.org, and its summary statement read “We are rich in things, but poor in happiness.” I thought, “yes, but it’s more than that.” Then a hymn began floating in my mind – yes, Paul, probably off-tune, but nonetheless, I heard singing and it hit me: we are “rich in things and poor in soul” and gradually I came to the refrain, “Grant us wisdom, Grant us courage....” Twentieth century pastor Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote this hymn “God of Grace and God of Glory” while serving Riverside Church, which was built by the Rockefellers in New York city. Listen to the third verse:

Cure thy children’s warring madness, bend our pride to thy control;
Shame our wanton selfish gladness, rich in things and poor in soul.
grant us wisdom, grant us courage lest we miss thy kingdom’s goal –
lest we miss thy kingdom’s goal.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Friends, God desires that we lead rich and abundant lives, and tells us that the basis of such a life rests in loving relationships and compassionate service. Divine wisdom teaches that life is not about possessions but about people; not about accumulating riches, but about sharing resources with those in need.

Westminster offers us innumerable ways to let go of things and invest our lives in serving others. If you are downsizing your household or have furniture to give away, contact John Bowman with the Samaritans ministry at church, which helps people who have been homeless or imprisoned get re-settled. If you have closets of clothes to clean out, take your items to the DE Clothing Bank, or to Sojourner’s Place. If you are moving to Cokesbury or to some retirement community and your son/daughter does not want grandmother’s dining room table, or Aunt Tilly’s good china, then bring them to church to be sold in next month’s annual bazaar through Antiques and Collectibles. Moreover, we might all clean out our basement and attic, our closets and cabinets, and donate our detritus to the White Elephant section of the bazaar. And, let’s be careful **not** to use our money to **restock our stuff!** Maybe that’s the part of the wisdom behind Jesus’ instruction to give the money to the poor. Otherwise, we might begin the cycle of accumulation all over again. Any money we get for our goods may be given to church and earmarked for Saturday morning breakfast, Family Promise, Habitat for Humanity, Meeting Ground, or Friendship House – all ministries supporting the poor and most vulnerable in society.

Jesus urges his disciples to travel lightly, but our way is to hold on tightly! Surely we’ve all heard the saying which is now cliché: “Let go and Let God.” But, friends, divine wisdom

declares that unless we let go of all we would hold so tightly, we cannot receive the abundant, yes eternal life, God desires for us. A life to enrich our souls.

One scholar suggests that the young man went away grieving, because he knew Jesus' instruction was right on. In our heart of hearts we know Jesus' direction will lead to eternal life too, don't we? What has hold of your life and your heart? What are you holding on to for dear life? Jesus tells us to let go, and follow him for He **is** the way to eternal life.

ⁱ Peterson, Eugene, *The Message*, 1993.

ⁱⁱ www.ecofuture.org

ⁱⁱⁱ Fosdick, H.E., "God of Grace and God of Glory" in Presbyterian Hymnal (#420)