

Diocese of New Jersey Online Sermon for Stewardship Sunday  
20 Pentecost - Proper 23 - Year B - October 10, 2021  
Amos 5:6-7, 10-15; Ps. 90 1-8, 12; Hebrews 3:1-6; **Mark 10: 17-27 (28-31)**  
Preacher: The Right Reverend William H. Stokes, *Bishop of New Jersey*

*"Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

Mark 10:17

In the name of the Father and of the Son of the Holy Spirit.

We're in a time of year when many congregations traditionally dedicate time to stewardship, especially financial stewardship as it relates to supporting and sustaining the mission and ministries of the church. The Diocese of New Jersey has designated this Stewardship Sunday. Ordinarily, many churches hold their annual pledge campaigns in October. This, however, is no ordinary October. It's October 2021.

For the second October in a row, COVID19 confronts us all. This pandemic has caused enormous change in our world and in our individual lives. Certainly, it has changed the way we all think about things.

The COVID19 pandemic has caused many to engage in what might be called "values clarification:" to give more thought to what's important in life; recognize that some things deserve greater attention than others; that some things which we thought were important, maybe even essential, just aren't that important at all. Many have experienced a heightened awareness of the giftedness of life; the preciousness of loving relationships; a deeper sense of thanksgiving for all that we have and are.

Even in the midst of the tragedies we have witnessed, profound goodness and love, even heroism, shine through. We've all seen them. Exhausted Intensive Care Unit doctors and nurses relate experiences of being the only person in at a sick bed to hold a dying person's hand. It is grievous, and yet it illustrates the tremendous capacity for love and sacrifice human beings are capable of. Yes, the COVID19 pandemic has changed our perspective. In lots of ways, it's been a time of values clarification, a time to focus on what's really important.

*As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before [Jesus], and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know 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.'" He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "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" (Mark 10:17 – 21).*

The person whom tradition often labels "the rich young man" says that he wants to attain eternal life. One scholar suggests this is "one form of the ultimate question on everyone's heart, even when it is unacknowledged: 'what is the meaning of life? What is my ultimate aim, and how do I attain it?'"<sup>1</sup> He senses that Jesus can help him with this and so he kneels in front of him and asks earnestly asks, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus' response appears curt: *"Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone"*(Mark 10:18). There's no small amount of irony here. New Testament scholar Mary Healy has noted, "Jesus' response is puzzling and has occasioned much speculation...But the mistake is to assume that Jesus is repudiating the attribute of good for himself. He is not denying that he is

good; rather, he is inviting the man to reflect more deeply on what he has just said.”<sup>2</sup> It seems certain Jesus is also on to something. He says to the man, “*You know 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'*” (Mark 10:19).

The man responds eagerly, perhaps too eagerly, “*Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth*” (Mark 10:20). Jesus looks at him and “loved him.” Numerous scholars have pointed out that it is the only occasion in the Gospels in which we are told Jesus “looked on an individual with love.”<sup>3</sup>

“*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*” (Mark 10:21).

Mark informs us that when the man heard this, “*he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions*” (Mark 10:22). In truth, it appears the man’s possession possessed him, had a hold on him that was so great he walked away from the offer of eternal life. Mark makes clear he was aware of the personal cost of this, telling us he went away “grieving.”

The man chose what was most important to him. He engaged in a values clarification exercise. Eternal life, the needs of the poor, God, were all trumped by his possessions. Yes, his possessions, idolatry of those possessions, had hold of him. Jesus had sensed it from the moment he said to him, “*You know 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.'*”

Jesus’ list to the young man didn’t include the first four commandments which are about belief in one God, about rejecting false idols.<sup>4</sup> If Jesus’ list had included these commandments, the young man would not have been able to say, “I have kept all these from my youth.” His many possessions were his downfall. Well, he’s not alone.

As Psychologist and Philosopher Bruce Hood observes in the Prologue to his 2019 book, *Possessed: Why We Want More than We Need*, “We come into the world with nothing and leave with nothing, but in between, in our brief moment on life’s stage, we strut and fret over possession as if our existence is defined by what we can own. For many of us, our lives are controlled by this relentless pursuit, even though we do so at the risk of ourselves, our children and, ultimately the future of the planet...We think that happiness will come from owning things but, if anything, it often leads to more misery.”<sup>5</sup>

The young man went away grieving, miserable. *Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”* (Mark 10:23). Mark tells us “*the disciples were perplexed at these words*” (Mark 10:24). Of course, they were perplexed!

In the world in which they lived, as in today’s world, many felt possessions were a concrete sign that one was blessed by God. And yet, as Wood astutely observes, how often the unrelenting pursuit of possessions leads to a misery.

*Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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”* (Mark 10:23).

The ridiculous image of a camel going through the eye of needle shocked Jesus’ disciples. “Then who can be saved?” *Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible but not for God; for God all things are possible”* (Mark 10:27).

Ah, the heart of the matter. Salvation, eternal life, doesn’t come about through our own efforts or our hard work. Salvation comes about by God’s grace and goodness alone.

Again, Mary Healy is insightful, writing, “The kingdom of God, which Jesus has been announcing from the beginning of his public ministry is something utterly beyond human achievement. It cannot be claimed as a right, it does not come as a reward for good behavior. It depends solely on the goodness of God who freely offers it as a gift.”<sup>6</sup>

In offering this gift, out of God’s own goodness and love, God experiences great delight and joy. The author of the Fourth Gospel is clear about this. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16).

All we have is a gift from God freely, generously, abundantly, lovingly given. Out of God’s great love, God has entrusted so much to us and asks us to be Stewards of it all for the sake of the kingdom. How can we not respond to this love in love with glad and generous hearts?

In the midst of this COVID19 environment in which we are living, as we have considered our values, considered what’s important and what’s not, how can we fail to recognize all we have to be thankful for. As we each consider our offerings of time, talent and treasure this year, with hearts filled with love, let us give thanks for all God has done for us through the grace and love of Jesus Christ who has called us into life with one another, giving of ourselves, of the money and possessions entrusted to us by God as Stewards, joyfully remembering the words of the Apostle Paul, “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7).

I want to close with a prayer written for this Stewardship Sunday by Fr. Dave Snyder of [Project Resource](#), Our Stewardship Team.

Gracious and generous God, giver of all we have and hold as stewards; grant the people of this church a deep and abiding awareness that all that we have—our health, our incomes, our jobs, our talents - are gifts received from your hand. Send your Holy Spirit to help us as we swim against the rising tides of materialism and greed in our culture. Send your Holy Spirit to teach us that we make a living by what we get but we make a life by what we give! Send your Holy Spirit to remind us that when we give generously and joyfully, we grow in grace and our spiritual lives are transformed as our stewardship becomes a witness to the love of Jesus Christ in our lives. We pray with grateful, thankful hearts, in the name of Jesus, the Christ...AMEN!

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<sup>1</sup> Healy, Mary *Catholic Commentary on the Sacred Scripture; The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) p. 202

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Healy, 203

<sup>4</sup> See Exodus 20:2-17

<sup>5</sup> Wood, Bruce *Possessed: Why We Want More Than We Need* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), xvi

<sup>6</sup> Healy, 205